Why is the Nuclear Industry Pushing for Private Fuel Storage (PFS)?

The Future of Nuclear Power and the Industry's Need for a "Waste Solution"

Private Fuel Storage (PFS) is an unnecessary, irresponsible, and unjust proposal for "dealing" with high-level nuclear waste.[1] The project claims to be a solution to the nuclear waste problem, but actually, it will only make the problem worse[2]. So why is the nuclear industry pushing for the approval of such a project, and why is the Nuclear Regulatory Commission on the verge of approving it?

The reason is because the nuclear industry wants to continue and expand the use of nuclear power, [3] and it needs a "waste solution" that it can present to the public. Recently, companies have moved to extend the licenses of their operating reactors, and have begun preparing to license new ones. The possibility of a "nuclear power future," however, rests on public acceptance that the problems and dangers of nuclear power, particularly those of highly radioactive waste, can be dealt with.

The long hailed "solution" to the nuclear waste problem – the proposed geologic repository at Yucca Mountain in Nevada - may very well never open. In July 2004, the DC Circuit Court of Appeals found the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) 10,000-year compliance period for radiation protection standards at Yucca Mountain to be illegal. The EPA is currently revising this standard. The 1992 Energy Policy Act requires EPA to set public health and safety standards "based upon and consistent with" the recommendations of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS). It is unclear, however, if Yucca Mountain can meet the stricter standard recommended by NAS.[4] In addition, the Department of Energy and the U.S. Geological Survey have recently found themselves at the center of a controversy over emails which imply the falsification of water infiltration data at Yucca Mountain. The DOE also missed its scheduled license application deadline for the project in December 2004, and continues to have problems with the completion of the project's online Licensing Support Network (LSN).

All of this leaves the nuclear industry lacking an immediate "waste solution." The industry, feeling the illusion of a solution is better than no solution, has continued to push for the approval of PFS. Although "temporary", PFS would in their opinion move the waste 'out of sight and out of mind', and perhaps convey to the public that nuclear waste is manageable. The approval and opening of PFS would also build pressure in many ways for Yucca Mountain to eventually open, regardless of Yucca's suitability.

Bottom line: The nuclear industry needs a waste solution to continue and expand the use of nuclear power. Given the serious problems with licensing Yucca Mountain, the nuclear industry has decided to push PFS through, regardless of the fact that PFS cannot solve the waste problem.

From the Nuclear Industry:
"But this [dry cask storage on-site at reactors] has not placated Exelon, which is likely to be a builder of new plants if any are ever ordered in this country. The company, like other utilities, would like the waste problem solved first…For the companies, the casks are a reminder of an unresolved problem."[5]

-Matt Wald, New York Times reporter, talking with James P. Malone, vice president for nuclear fuels at Exelon.

"Questions about the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste facility must be answered before new reactors can be built."[6]

- GE Power Systems Chief Executive Officer John G. Rice

From the Bush Administration:

"Another problem, and one that Mr. Cheney fully acknowledges, is the lack of a national repository for the storage of nuclear waste. In his speech today, the vice president warned that the lack of a storage site could be a deal killer. Without a site, he said, 'eventually the contribution we can count on from the nuclear industry will, in fact, decline'."[7]

"As we prepare to increase nuclear generating capacity in the future, we also want to get on with the business of finding a geologic repository for long-term waste disposal."

-Vice-President Cheney at the Nuclear Energy Institute´s annual conference in Washington, DC, May 22, 2001.[8]

"[T]o consider whether we can overcome the impediments to tapping its potential [that of nuclear power] more fully…[we need to] to find an acceptable way to store used fuel and radioactive waste."[9]

-Alan Greenspan, speaking at Rice University, November 2001.

"Inaction on the part of the federal government [regarding Yucca Mountain and a "waste solution"] could jeopardize the continued use of nuclear energy."[10]

-Alabama Governor Don Siegelman, November 2001

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[1] Please see "Private Fuel Storage", Public Citizen, February 2005, http://www.citizen.org/documents/PFSfactsheetnew.pdf.

[2] PFS is not a solution to the waste problem. An aboveground storage facility in Utah is not a suitable site for the long-term storage of high-level radioactive waste. In addition to the risks of this facility and the fact that the "temporary" nature of PFS is extremely questionable in light of Yucca Mountain's continuing problems, all of this waste will have to be transported significant distances across the country through cities and communities. This transport will be rushed forward with many unresolved issues. These risks are justified by NRC and the companies involved because they assert that the movement of 40,000 metric tons of irradiated fuel from reactors (at max and taking twenty years to accomplish) will make the rest of the country much safer. This, however, is simply not true. Significant amounts of waste will always remain on-site at reactors, particularly as reactors are relicensed and continue to operate. Reactors produce an additional 2000 metric tons of waste each year nationwide. Handling and transporting 40,000 metric tons of waste, and parking it aboveground in Utah, will not make communities in this country safer. In fact, it will do just the opposite. Please see Public Citizen's fact sheet, "Private Fuel Storage", February 2005, for more information.

[3] The nuclear industry has been hailing itself as the "solution to global warming", and has been receiving substantial press on this account. The nuclear industry is highly profitable (partially due to extensive subsidies), politically powerful, and has the potential to only become more so. Unfortunately, while nuclear power does emit a reduced amount of greenhouse gases, it still releases significant greenhouse gases in its fuel chain, and moreover, it creates highly radioactive waste. The industry also continues the use of finite energy resources, which has been shown to lead to global conflict, and retains a centralized corporate technocrat model of energy generation and transmission.

[4] The NAS study, which was issued in 1995, recommended "that compliance with the standard be measured at the time of peak risk, whenever it occurs," and found "no scientific basis for limiting the time period of the individual-risk standard to 10,000 years, or any other value." According to DOE's projections, the peak risk to an individual from leaking radioactivity would occur at about 300,000 years after closure of the dump.

[5] Wald, Matthew. "New Focus on an Old Nuclear Problem." New York Times 4 June 2001, Section A , Page 14.

[6] Ux Weekly, Ux Consulting Company, LLC (UxC) (which publishes one of the nuclear fuel industry's best known newsletters) 12 May, p3.

[7] Seelye, Katharine Q. "Nuclear Power Gains Status After Lobbying." New York Times 23 May 2001.

[8] Sammon, Bill and Patrice Hill. "Cheney Calls for Rational Debate on Nuclear Power." Washington Times 23 May 2001.

[9] Nuclear Energy Institute, "Nuclear Energy Insight", Nov/Dec 2001, p 6.

[10] Alabama Governor Siegelman urging recommendation of Yucca Mountain. Nuclear Energy Institute, "Nuclear Energy Insight", Nov/Dec 2001.