

MISMANAGEMENT AT YUCCA MOUNTAIN: DOE Reassigned Quality Assurance Staff to Cover Up Flaws in Project Procedure

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In an apparent effort to stifle any criticism of the effort to establish Nevada's Yucca Mountain as the country's main repository of high-level nuclear waste, Yucca project managers from the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) reassigned three of four members of a "quality assurance" review team following their discovery of flaws in the project's work procedures.

Lester Wagner, George Harper, and Don Harris (who was ultimately given his job back) were reassigned from their positions on the quality assurance review team for the Yucca contractor Navarro Research and Engineering after they uncovered faults in the Yucca project work procedures that were being revised by Bechtel SAIC, a top contractor for the proposed repository.

This action by the DOE smacks of whistleblower intimidation and is typical of its attempts to suppress dissent and smother criticism in its relentless drive to acquire a license for the project from the U.S. Nuclear Regulator Commission (NRC). Another Yucca quality insurance auditor, Jim Mattimoe, was fired after he raised criticisms of the way in which project concerns were handled. (A review by the U.S. Department of Labor ultimately determined that his firing had been unfair.)

"I have seen many times when issues are put aside or dismissed," said Bill Belke, a recently-retired NRC oversight officer for the Yucca project, to the *Las Vegas Sun*. "This creates a chilling effect on the project," Belke added. "People are afraid of retaliation and retribution. It's unhealthy. And it's not good for the program." Belke had worked on the project for 15 years prior to his retirement.

Due to concern about the reassignments and whistleblower intimidation at the DOE, Nevada Sens. Harry Reid (D) and John Ensign (R) held a field hearing of the Senate Energy and Water Subcommittee on May 28, 2003 in Las Vegas. Two witnesses invited to testify at the hearing failed to show up: Don Harris of the aforementioned Navarro auditing firm and Robert Clark, a Yucca project contractor and former DOE quality assurance director. The two Nevada senators charged that these witnesses did not attend because of intimidation by DOE officials bent on moving the project forward, no matter what. "These are people who wanted to come and testify but they were afraid," asserted Sen. Reid at the hearing, according to the *Review-Journal* newspaper of Las Vegas. (DOE officials denied the charges of intimidation.)

The General Accounting Office (GAO)—the nonpartisan congressional auditor and investigator—has also been critical of the DOE's handling of Yucca. Robin Nazzaro, a GAO officer who testified at the hearing, noted that the DOE's quality assurance program has been plagued with problems, calling it "less than desirable," according to the *Review-Journal*.

A culture of fear and intimidation pervades the DOE Yucca mountain nuclear waste repository project, making it virtually impossible for any criticism to be taken into account. It is clear that the DOE is settled on Yucca as its site, and is determined to do whatever it takes to acquire licensure for the disastrously ill-planned project.