

Nuclear waste sites come to fruition in Andrews Facility will take radioactive waste from 36 states starting in January

BY JON VANDERLAAN jvanderlaan@oaoa.com - Odessa American – Nov. 13, 2011

“At the end of the day, the goal is simple: Safety first!”

That’s what a sign at the entrance and exit of Texas’ first low-level radioactive waste disposal facility reads, a facility that claims no accidents causing an employee to miss time have occurred in the past four years.

But more eyes have been drawn to the radioactive material being dumped there than to the safety of its workers.

As with any topic involving the word “nuclear,” Waste Control Specialists President Rod Baltzer said there are always bound to be some opponents.

The three dump sites include the already-built byproduct site, a commercial site and a yet-to-be-completed federal site that is under the same license.

The facility will take nuclear waste from 36 states, with a 10 percent tax from Texas and Vermont clients and a 20 percent tax for all other clients.

Because the state of Texas owns the land and Andrews County financed the building of the facility with a \$75 million bond in 2010, each will get a share. The state and county will split the in-state taxes while the state will receive all of the 20 percent tax from out-of-state customers.

Although the focus Thursday was the ribboncutting event with prominent elected officials, it quickly shifts to preparations for the first radioactive waste shipments in January.

“We expect to be very busy,” WCS Vice President Linda Beach said.

And the towns of Andrews and Eunice, N.M., have been touted as champions in the process of bringing the facility to western Andrews County, and just a few miles outside of Eunice.

ANDREWS SUPPORT

Andrews Mayor Robert Zap said he’s been involved in the project for 15 years, and the city of Andrews has been open throughout.

“They said, in effect, let’s look at it and see and decide for ourselves,” he said.

“We’re not going to be swayed one way or the other by demonstrations and stuff. We want the facts.”

And Zap said he and other city and county officials got the facts and relayed them to the public, which has been supportive.

Although a small number of people will always be found opposing such projects, he said the small percentage was “almost unreal.”

“One of the things we looked at from the very beginning was the need (for the facility). And we were impressed by the tremendous need,” Zap said. “What horrified us was that a lot of nuclear waste was being stored haphazardly.”

County Judge Richard Dolgener said it was important for the community from an economic standpoint as well, with the oilfield being such a volatile business.

When oil engineers moved out in the 1980s, he said, the community was scrambling to find a new industry. That’s when the prospect of a nuclear business came.

“What’s going to fill that (oil) void is science and math, and that’s what’s coming in with the nuclear stuff,” Dolgener said. “We’re an oil community, so when the price of oil goes down, we’re going to struggle.”

Of course, the \$10.5 million the county received for being the host to the facility doesn’t hurt.

But Dolgener said he believes it’s earned for being the host county, something he’s even been questioned about by his own family.

“It is in your backyard,” he said. “I think really just the stigma of (nuclear). People don’t understand the science. Everyone’s seen the bomb and the bomb’s been used to kill. But there’s a lot of good that came out of it with medicine and science.”

The vote to pass the bond issue in Andrews County only passed by three votes, and a challenge over the results even took a brief trip up to the Texas Supreme Court before the state’s highest court declined to hear the issue.

However, Dolgener said vote was close that because of the economic state of the nation, not the environmental aspects.

EUNICE , N . M .

Bridget McCasland has lived in Eunice her entire life and now is the resident of the closest house to the disposal facility and the uranium enrichment plant owned by Louisiana Energy Services, just a few miles down the road.

Instead of being worried about the plant and disposal site, it seems to have become a way of life.

McCasland previously worked at the LES plant and has several family members working at the plant or disposal facility.

“It really doesn’t bother me,” she said. “It seems like they have everything safeguarded.”

Some community outrage came with the introduction of the enrichment plant that broke ground six years ago, but McCasland said most people supported it.

Lee Cheney, a 75-yearold Hobbs resident who currently owns a smoke shop in his garage, said his opposition to the nuclear waste disposal plant in Andrews goes back several years.

Based on his research, he said he believes the containers used for storing the waste eventually will decay, spreading the nuclear material and possibly causing an evacuation of up to 15 miles.

“It’s just going to pollute the whole area,” Cheney said. “In my opinion, there are no honest analysts that work for these companies that will tell people the truth.”

THE HISTORY

Waste Control Specialists began putting money into finding a radioactive waste dumping site in 1995, Baltzer said. It already had obtained a permit in 1992 to dump hazardous waste, but Andrews was looking to further diversify its economy.

He said the company got its processing license for the low-level radioactive waste in 1997, a year before he joined the company.

Processing, however, is not the same as disposal and is merely the method of moving the nuclear waste from location to location for storage.

Kent Hance, a board member for Waste Control Specialists and former state representative and U.S. congressman, said he went to the site in 1991 to determine its viability as a potential location to dump the material. Hance and a number of other elected officials have visited the site, and State Rep. Tryon Lewis said the Andrews facility has since become a location of national discussion.

U.S. Congressman Mike Conaway said he brags on Andrews whenever he gets the chance for its foresight in allowing the disposal site to locate there, and he's been keeping up with the project since he was elected in 2005.

"They've done a good job of bringing the community along every step of the way," he said.

It wasn't going to be until 2003 that the facility would be able to contemplate disposing nuclear material, when Baltzer said the Texas legislature changed the law to allow private companies to accept commercial nuclear waste.

He said WCS applied for its license in 2004, went through five years of "rigorous review," and earned its license in 2009.

The first shipment of uranium by-product actually came in 2009, but it's a different kind of radioactive material than the type that will be shipped to the facility beginning in 2012, Baltzer said.

Uranium by-product is the traces of uranium left on the location it is extracted from, while the waste coming in with this commercial facility consists of contaminated materials from nuclear sites, such as tools, clothes and other materials.

"Uranium, obviously, you think of bombs," he said. "But weaponized uranium doesn't go here."

In fact, Baltzer said, highlevel uranium is not disposed of anywhere in the United States.

HOW SAFE IS IT?

Beach stressed the importance of making sure everything is done the right way and the environment is not contaminated by the radioactive waste.

Each shipment is required to be checked and tracked to make sure it contains the materials it is supposed to and the company knows where it is and where it is going, she said.

The material is not taken out of its original container but is placed in 10-foot-tall, 1-foot-thick cement cylinders, which are placed in the landfill. Those containers are then surrounded by grout, and the bottom and sides of the landfill are protected by a liner and 500 feet of red bed clay.

In addition to the various checks each shipment must go through, Texas Commission on Environmental Quality officials are constantly on site, making sure it goes well.

Office of Waste Deputy Director Brent Wade said inspectors will be on the site every day ensuring proper procedures are followed.

“We have absolute invested interest in making sure everything goes right,” because the state owns the property, he said.

The commission can impose everything from a change in process to a formal sanction against the property. Prospective clients also scout out the facility.

“They want to make sure they don’t send their waste to a place that will get them in the news,” Beach said.

The Ogallala Aquifer is 10 miles north of the site, she said, and even if it was closer, it would not be in danger.

Ultimately, both Beach and Baltzer rendered the possibility of a failure in the system and leaking of radioactive material from the site as “impossible.”

“The most a person could be exposed is the equivalent of a chest X-ray, and that’s only if they were digging down there for water,” Beach said. But even then, she said there is no water under the site.

She said even if the concrete containers wear down after 300 to 500 years, the other safeguards will keep radioactive material in the landfill for “thousands of years.”



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Waste Control Specialists employees secure an 800-foot ribbon from the wind stretched across the first cell at the Texas Low-Level Radioactive Waste Disposal Compact Facility on Thursday in Andrews County prior to grand opening festivities.

<http://www.oaoa.com/news/andrews-75765-fruiton-nuclear.html>