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Dallas company has ambitious plan to store high-level nuclear waste in West Texas

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WASHINGTON — The idea of burying America's most highly radioactive nuclear waste deep under Yucca Mountain in Nevada has put politicians, activists and the nuclear energy industry at odds since 1987.

That's when Congress designated the deep-underground facility as a permanent home for spent fuel rods from the nation's aging — and in some cases out-of-service — power plants.

Now, a Dallas company wants to sidestep that long-stalled debate and welcome thousands of metric tons of the material to its sprawling site in West Texas.

After notifying the Nuclear Regulatory Commission of its plans on Friday, executives from Waste Control Specialists commented on the ambitious and unprecedented proposal at the National Press Club on Monday.

CEO William J. Lindquist said the company will formally request a permit from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission next year. It will also need the buy-in from the Department of Energy and, potentially, clarifying legislation from Congress.

If those approvals arrive on schedule, he said, the spent fuel could arrive at the facility by 2020.

That may seem slow, but the question of what to do with the nation's ever-growing stockpile of spent nuclear fuel has bedeviled the federal government for decades. Tens of thousands of tons of spent fuel from nuclear reactors is currently stored on-site at nuclear plants in 33 states, including two in Texas. The nearest, Comanche Peak Nuclear Power Plant, is in Glen Rose, 40 miles southwest of Fort Worth.

It's an arena, after all, where developments move slowly enough that the proposed “interim storage facility” in Andrews County would operate for 60 years. The waste itself would remain highly dangerous to living things, should it ever leak, for tens of thousands of years.

Shipped twice

Environmentalists and others who have fought the Yucca Mountain proposal for years were quick to denounce the Texas plan Monday — and largely on the same grounds.

Diane D’Arrigo, a project director for Nuclear Information and Resource Service, a group that opposes the Yucca Mountain plan, said finding a place to store the waste temporarily only increases the risk. It would mean the fuel would be shipped twice — once from the plants to Texas, and then again decades from now from Texas to a permanent site.

“Moving nuclear waste to a supposedly temporary consolidated storage place gives the delusion of a solution when in fact it will at least double the risks,” D’Arrigo said. “WCS is really volunteering to make the U.S. nuclear problem worse by putting the deadliest radioactive wastes from nuclear power on the same highways, railways and waterways we all use every day.”

But industry advocates have long argued that it has a perfect record in moving lower-level contaminated waste from nuclear plants, even if so far no one has tried to transport the spent fuel.

‘Looking to diversify’

WCS is a subsidiary of a firm previously owned by Dallas billionaire Harold Simmons, who died in 2013. The firm is owned by a trust controlled by two of Simmons’ daughters, Lindquist said.

In 2005, it began developing a 14,900-acre facility in Andrews County to bury lower-level radioactive waste from hospitals and other sites nationwide. It now stores waste from Texas and 34 other states.

Andrews County Judge Richard H. Dolgener said in an interview Monday that the company has been a boon for his county.

“This has been great,” he said. “It began years ago when we were living with the boom and bust cycles of the oil industry,” he said. “We had 100 petroleum engineers working out here for Exxon and Amoco. There were here one day, and the next they were gone — and with them, the \$100,000-a-year jobs.

“So we started looking to diversify.”

After clearing years of state environmental hurdles, the facility is running smoothly with 160 employees, Dolgener said. About three-quarters of the workers live in Andrews County, and the rest commute from across the nearby New Mexico border.

WCS president Rod Baltzer wouldn’t put a figure on the total cost of the facility, but said it would be “millions, but not billions.”

Speedy approval?

The company expects a faster-than-usual approval for its permit request, because it has already spent five years and \$100 million showing Texas regulators that the low-level waste it has buried poses no risk to nearby water supplies, including the vastly important Ogallala Aquifer.

The Legislature signed off on the current operations, and the state draws 25 percent of its revenues. Andrews County’s share is between \$3 million and \$4 million — and, the county judge said, could jump another \$10 million if the expansion is approved.

More critical for the project is the need for approval in Washington. The NRC will control the permitting process, but it is the U.S. Department of Energy that would ultimately be the company’s customer. That agency is charged by Congress to dispose of the spent fuel; it will write any checks to pay for those transfers.

Currently, it’s supposed to spend those funds to send the waste to a permanent facility, should one ever be built.

Lindquist said it may be that the department can tweak its rules and use the money for a temporary site instead, but if not, the company will be looking for new legislation.

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