



By Jeff Beattie

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Waste Control Specialists sets 2020 date to open spent fuel storage facility

In what would be a major step forward for the Obama administration's plan to find volunteer communities to host storage and disposal facilities for spent reactor fuel and high-level radioactive waste, Waste Control Specialists announced Monday that it expects to submit a license application next year for an interim storage facility at its existing low-level nuclear waste disposal site in west Texas, and that it hopes to open the facility for business as early as 2020.

Waste Control Specialists' (WCS) hopes of building a national, interim storage site for spent fuel at its Andrews County waste disposal site have not been a secret.

But at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., Monday, WCS Chief Executive Officer William Lindquist made clear just how serious the company is, how fast it hopes to move and the proposed scale of its project.

Lindquist said WCS informed the Nuclear Regulatory Commission Friday that it hopes to license a facility to initially store 40,000 metric tons of spent fuel at its low-level nuclear waste (LLW) site in Andrews County.

He said WCS expects NRC could issue a license in 2019, and that the company could begin accepting spent nuclear fuel by 2020, a lightning-fast timeline in the crawling and controversial business of building nuclear waste facilities. WCS also revealed it is partnering with a U.S. subsidiary of France's Areva, which will contribute transportation and storage casks and assist with project licensing.

The use of Areva's proven systems will speed up the project, Lindquist said, as will the fact that WCS spent five years and millions of dollars characterizing the Andrews County site to win approval to store LLW and other hazardous materials.

“We spent five years getting a license and characterizing that site,” he said. “We know exactly what is under the ground below us and it is just red clay—600 feet of red clay.”

WCS is one of several communities responding to the Obama administration’s plan to select nuclear waste storage and disposal sites from among volunteer communities interested in the economic benefits of hosting such facilities.

The administration adopted that approach after moving in 2010 to cancel the Yucca Mountain nuclear repository in Nevada, which for more than two decades had been the nation’s planned repository for high-level radioactive waste (HLW) and spent fuel.

But Andrews County has perhaps more pieces in place than other interested communities. It has a successful commercial entity—WCS—aggressively pushing the possibility; an established nuclear waste site, although one not currently authorized to accept spent fuel and HLW; and supportive local leaders. Last month, Andrews County local leaders passed a resolution backing WCS’ plan as a potential economic driver for the region.

Talking to reporters Monday, Lindquist argued that his smallish company could accomplish what the federal government has failed to do for decades—create either a central storage or permanent repository for spent fuel and high-level waste currently stockpiled at dozens of reactor sites across the nation and at Energy Department nuclear sites.

“This has been tried by the federal government, and what we are offering is a private enterprise outside the Beltway trying to provide an innovative way to solve a problem that has escaped this country for decades.”

He also pointed out that WCS is the only private company in the country to successfully site a facility licensed to take all three categories of low-level waste while multiple other projects failed despite 1980 legislation meant to encourage such facilities across the country.

Lundquist said WCS’ customer would be the Energy Department, which would pay WCS to store spent fuel that DOE is obliged to take and dispose of under contracts with U.S. nuclear utilities. DOE was supposed to begin accepting spent fuel beginning in 1989, but it has been unable to do so because of delays in the Yucca

project, costing the federal government tens of millions of dollars and counting in legal damages.

Interestingly, Lindquist said he thinks DOE might be able to make use of a facility like WCS's disposal site under the Obama administration's new consent-based siting process—without any need to rewrite the federal Nuclear Waste Policy Act (NWPA).

Most nuclear waste experts have suggested Congress must rewrite that law to eliminate provisions tying the development of nuclear waste storage sites to progress on the Yucca facility. They also point to restrictions in the law on use of money from the federal Nuclear Waste Fund for projects outside the Yucca project.

Responding to questions on that subject, Lindquist said: “If we don't have legislation, the question is whether DOE is able under the rulings in the court—where they have an obligation and they are incurring penalties--do they have the ability to fulfil that obligation by taking title to the waste and shipping it to WCS or some other interim facility under the NWPA.”

“I think there is an interpretation...that DOE can do that, they can enter into a contractual obligation to perform their duties or relieve their obligations,” he added.

Lindquist said DOE was aware of WCS' plans, and that the two parties would begin more formal talks soon.

From a regulatory perspective, a WCS spokesman said the project needs state and water discharge permits like any industrial project, as well as NRC approval.

Lindquist said the project will also need approval from Texas' legislature, and that WCS will open discussions with state lawmakers after getting NRC approval and the outline of a compensation scheme from DOE.

He said the Texas legislation would spell out how revenues from the project would be shared, and suggested that might be modeled on the current split-up of revenues from WCS' LLW operations, from which the state gets 25 percent and Andrews County gets 5 percent.

“I would hope and envision we could create the same kind of thing here as well,” he said Monday.

