



WCS to seek license for temporary high level nuclear waste storage

BY COREY PAUL cpaul@oaoa.com | Feb. 9, 2015

Waste Control Specialists could begin storing high-level nuclear waste as soon as 2020 if the licensing process the company began late last week goes as planned, executives announced Monday.

WCS on Friday sent a letter to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission notifying the agency of the company's intent to seek a license to build a facility able to store spent nuclear fuel from power plants for 40 years or longer. WCS executives detailed the proposal on a Monday.

The facility, if approved, would be the first of its kind and settle the contentious question of what to do with America's highly radioactive spent nuclear fuel until a permanent solution is found. The waste right now is stored in radioactive pools at power plants for at least five years and then in thickly walled casks.

"Until the debate over a disposal repository is settled and the years it takes to license and construct such a facility, our nation needs a safe centralized interim storage solution," said WCS President Rod Baltzer during a Monday news conference in Washington D.C. "We believe Andrews County and WCS provide that safe storage solution."

The notification letter sent Friday follows a resolution passed by Andrews County commissioners last month in support of the company's plan. WCS will formally request a license for the site from the NRC next spring, said WCS' CEO William Lindquist. Eventually, the company would pursue the Department of Energy as its customer.

WCS already operates a low-level waste storage facility in the county and the proposal to store highly-radioactive spent fuel enjoys widespread support in Andrews, according to County Judge Richard Dolgener. About 500 people attended a town hall hosted by WCS in December to discuss the plan.

“As an overall community, we haven’t really heard an uprising of ‘No,’” said Dolgener, who said the more than \$3 million the county gets from WCS pays for public infrastructure like ambulances and recreational centers. He called the letter of intent a “very very preliminary stage.”

WCS officials also said there would be several more public meetings with Andrews residents, pledging the project would depend on community consent.

The DOE has authority from Congress to dispose of spent nuclear fuel and spend billions of dollars collected from nuclear utilities on a permanent disposal facility.

But Lindquist said WCS will ask for clarification on whether the DOE has authority to send waste to an interim facility like the one proposed in Andrews or if new legislation would be necessary.

“We need to have legislative changes or policy clarifications to make sure a company like ours can get paid for this as well as having the licensing material in hand,” Lindquist said.

In the meantime, WCS executives said the company will start developing about 100 acres of the storage area, intended to first take on stored waste from Texas’ two nuclear power plants and for stockpiles of high-level radioactive waste sitting at decommissioned nuclear reactors throughout the country.

That initial phase would account for about 10,000 metric tons of waste, according to the company. WCS will also evaluate “several hundred acres” for later phases, according to the letter sent to the NRC.

Executives on Monday did not have a cost estimate of permitting and building the facility, only saying it would be “millions of dollars but not billions of dollars.”

As it stands, about 70,000 tons of highly radioactive material sits at the nation’s nuclear plants, which are running out of room, according to the Nuclear Energy Institute, a trade group that on Monday announced support for the WCS proposal.

For much of the past two decades, the debate on what to do with spent nuclear fuel centered on a plan to bury spent nuclear fuel deep underground at Yucca Mountain in Nevada.

But the Yucca Mountain permanent disposal plan became scuttled in 2010, after Congress shut off funding amid concerns such as safely transporting the nuclear waste. West Texans will now have to grapple with some of the same concerns.

The federal government for years collected billions of dollars from nuclear utilities to pay for permanent disposal of the high level waste. A federal court halted that in 2013, citing no credible plan for what to do with the waste.

A presidential commission in 2012 suggested finding a community that would allow interim storage of the spent fuel until a plan for permanent storage is developed. But “interim” could still be decades if the WCS facility is approved.

In their letter, WCS officials envisioned a plan to operate a high-level storage facility for an initial period of 40 years. Executives said storing highly radioactive waste would require a security ramp up to the degree of a power plant.

WCS, a subsidiary of Dallas-based Valhi, could make billions. That money would benefit the state, which gets about 25 percent of the revenue from the current low-level storage site and it would benefit Andrews County, which gets about \$1 million per quarter, according to WCS officials.

The Andrews commissioners’ resolution calls for the county judge to be the chief negotiator with WCS for how much the county would gain from the facility.

Longtime opponents of the low-level nuclear waste facility released a joint statement Monday condemning the higher-level waste storage, arguing that the shipments could become a terrorist target; that shipments would be hazardous; that the site is too close to the Ogallala Aquifer; and that short-term storage could become de facto permanent disposal.

“This plan is all risk and no reward for the state of Texas, and poses transportation and accident risks around the country,” said Tom “Smitty” Smith, director of Public Citizen’s Texas Office. “We don’t need Fukushima Freeways.”

WCS officials argue water would not be endangered at what they describe as one of the most geologically studied areas in the country.

“We know exactly what is beneath us, and it’s just a lot of red clay, 600 feet of it,” Lindquist said,

The NEI said small nuclear waste shipments already happen safely, generally by rail, under strict protocols.

State Rep. Brooks Landgraf released a statement encouraging community input but taking no stance on whether he supports the WCS proposal.

“This will be a long process and I look forward to working with the residents and elected officials in Andrews to be sure that the health and safety concerns and needs of everyone in the community are accounted for throughout this discussion,” Landraf said in the statement.

Landgraf was unavailable for an interview Monday.

But his predecessor Tryon Lewis opposed storing high-level waste at the facility, telling the Odessa American in April that “I don’t think that is what the site is meant for,” even though he

thought workers there could handle it. “Just to make money, I don’t think it’s worth it to do that. Hey, let’s make a quick buck. I don’t think it’s worth it because you never know.”

Lewis declined Monday to discuss his past opposition or WCS’ letter with the NRC, only reiterating that he believes a permanent geological depository is the solution to the nation’s storage problem.

Establishing the interim storage site for high-level radioactive waste would require an environmental study before the application to the NRC, according to independent experts.

NRC spokesman David McIntyre said the agency received WCS’ letter of intent on Friday. The agency asks the industry to so it has time to gather resources and staff to vet the project. The review could take three years, he said.

“We wouldn’t necessarily be ready for it,” McIntyre said. “So typically we like the industry to give us a heads up when they plan to submit a major application like this.”

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1 image

Odessa American File Photo

Waste Control Specialists prepare for the grand opening in November 2011 of the Texas Low-Level Radioactive Waste Disposal Compact Facility in Andrews County. WCS may become a temporary storage facility for high-level nuclear waste if the license it seeks is approved.

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