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Company seeks to store nuclear waste from Rancho Seco, other power plants



The involvement of Sacramento Municipal Utilities District with nuclear energy could end if a deal to transfer waste from the old Rancho Seco nuclear plant to Texas is made. **Randy Pench** rpench@sacbee.com

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The long-sought removal of nuclear waste stored at the decommissioned Rancho Seco power plant came a step closer to occurring Thursday as the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission announced it had received an application to open a nuclear waste storage facility in Texas that would receive the material.

The nuclear waste transfer, if approved, would end the Sacramento Municipal Utility District's involvement with nuclear energy, which began when Rancho Seco started generating energy in 1975. The nuclear plant permanently shut down in 1989.

The application by Waste Control Specialists marks the second time a private company not associated with a nuclear plant has offered to remove the material. Waste Control Specialists seeks to operate a 155-acre storage facility in Andrews, Texas, which would receive material from eight shut-down or decommissioned nuclear power plants around the country, including Rancho Seco.

In 2006, Private Fuel Storage, a project funded by eight private electricity companies, was given the go-ahead from the commission to build a waste storage site in Utah. The project, however, was scrapped in 2012 after the U.S. Department of Interior denied a land lease and a right-of-way to cross American Indian land.

At present there is no permanent repository for Rancho Seco's nuclear waste, or that from any other decommissioned nuclear plant in the U.S.

At Rancho Seco, 493 nuclear fuel assemblies are stored in casks in concrete bunkers. The site is roughly 27 miles south of Sacramento. The assemblies hold 22 metric tons of uranium, said Einar Ronningen manager of Rancho Seco assets for SMUD.

He said the storage has always been a temporary solution for the waste.

"This would be a tremendous relief for SMUD," said Ronningen. "The ratepayers decided in 1989 that SMUD should get out of the nuclear business and we've been trying ever since to do that – but we cannot get out until the U.S. Department of Energy performs and removes the material from the site."

SMUD has a contract with the Energy Department to remove and manage the spent fuel material, but the responsibility for paying the costs falls to the department, Ronningen said.

Since closing, SMUD has shouldered the cost of maintaining and storing the nuclear material – at a current cost of \$5 million annually.

SMUD recovers costs from the federal government through lawsuits. The utility was awarded \$22 million earlier this year in federal claims court, and \$53 million in 2014.

The application by Waste Control Specialists begins a lengthy process at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, and the facility will have to meet other challenges that would make any waste transfer unlikely before 2021.

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