

THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

West Texas Site Applies for Nuke Waste License

by Marisa Endicott, Medill News Service

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[Enlarge](#) Photo by David Bowser

Modular concrete canisters containing nuclear waste are shown at the bottom of a storage pit near Andrews, Texas.

WASHINGTON — A West Texas toxic waste storage facility is seeking a license to accept and store spent nuclear reactor fuel, much of it highly radioactive.

Waste Control Specialists, which operates a low-level nuclear waste dump in Andrews County, announced Thursday that it has applied for the license to build and maintain a temporary storage site for the spent fuel.

“We think we've got a great site, we've got consent with the local community, we think the license application is really good,” said Rod Baltzer, the company's president and CEO in an interview after the announcement at the National Press Club.

The company said it is partnering with AREVA Inc. and NAC International Inc., longtime industry leaders in nuclear waste engineering and transportation. The group hopes to start construction by 2019 after a standard three-year review by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. If the NRC signs off on the application, the facility could begin accepting used nuclear fuel by 2021.

The proposal faces some public opposition, and possible complications from uncertain legal procedures and support on Capitol Hill.

Political and industry leaders have spent decades unsuccessfully seeking a permanent storage facility for the nation's roughly 70,000 metric tons of accumulated spent fuel and radioactive byproducts from nuclear reactors. Power plants have been forced to store the waste despite a promise by the government to find an alternative location.

The Yucca Mountain site in Nevada was long considered the most viable option, but that state's congressional delegation blocked the plan. WCS would serve as an interim solution while the hunt continues for a permanent site.

"We've got a unique environment and a unique state, and I think they understand the risks and the technical challenges," Baltzer explained. "But they also know that with the proper regulatory oversight and the proper technology that you can overcome those."

WCS currently oversees a 14,000-acre low-level waste disposal facility. The application seeks a 40-year license to take in up to 40,000 metric tons of higher level waste in eight phases, with the possibility for 20-year renewals going forward. The temporary storage facility would occupy 320 acres, or 2.2 percent of the facility's property, according to the proposal.

"We are prepared for – I'll call it – the long haul," Baltzer said. "We've told our community this could be 60 to 100 years."

That raises a red flag for opponents like Diane D'Arrigo, a project director at the non-profit Nuclear Information and Resource Service. "It will give the illusion of a solution," she said.

Critics say transporting highly radioactive material through densely populated areas will pose risks to residents of Texas and nearby New Mexico, and other regions of the country. Spent nuclear fuel from power plants could be vulnerable in transit to accidents or attacks, exposing people and land to long-term radioactive poisoning, opponents of the Texas project say.

The SEED Coalition and the activist group Public Citizen highlighted these and other concerns in a statement that quoted the Dallas County Commissioner Theresa Daniel and Bexar County Commissioner Tommy Calvert, among others.

During the news conference in Washington, Mike McMahon, AREVA Inc.'s vice president, said the firm has a long track record of hauling fuel without incident. Transportation of nuclear transportation is safe, McMahon insisted.

"We transport tremendous amounts of material every day," he said. "The Navy transports nuclear fuel on a routine basis."

Detractors remain unconvinced.

"They may talk about the record, but the record is nothing compared to what we're going to be unleashing," D'Arrigo said in an interview following the announcement. "If they approve this site, we will have literally thousands, tens of thousands of shipments over the next few decades on our roads and rails."

Another challenge for the Texas waste facility will be navigating legal and Congressional hurdles. For the project to go forward, the Department of Energy would have to assume the title to – and liability for – the spent nuclear fuel stored at the site, but it is unclear whether the DOE can take such action on its own or needs Congressional approval.

Legislation introduced last September by Rep. [Mike Conaway](#), R-Texas, of Andrews, and another bill proposed in March by Rep. Mick Mulvaney, R-S.C., would authorize the government to send spent nuclear fuel to a temporary site. But neither measure has made it past the initial introductory step.

“The biggest x-factor for us is the contractual matters, and can and when DOE would take title to it and what that process looks like,” Baltzer said.