



NRC seeks safety details about proposed nuclear waste site

WCS sends first batch of answers this week in routine request



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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- [Here is a link to NRC and WCS documents related to the company's application.](#)

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Waste Control Specialists recently began providing federal regulators with more details about plans to store high-level nuclear waste in Andrews County, after a letter from the agency fueled opponents' criticisms that the company is unfit for the task.

The June 22 letter from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Mark Lombard said the company's application "does not contain sufficient technical information" relating to security plans and the safety of dry storage casks.

The agency asked for more details in order to begin a technical review of the application that WCS submitted in April.

This week, WCS responded with the some of the requested information and clarified a sticking point — questions about what nuclear materials the storage site will accept decades from now, WCS spokesman Chuck McDonald, said. He also provided copies

of letters from the company. WCS is seeking initial approval to store up to 40,000 metric tons.

WCS officials clarified the company only wants a license to store the materials such as spent nuclear fuel rods using a design and method already approved by the federal regulator. In the first phase lasting a decade or longer, that would amount to about 5,000 metric tons. If the company wanted to store other material in the future, the NRC would have to OK it first.

WCS is scheduled to send further responses to the NRC over the next three months. NRC spokeswoman Maureen Conley, who described the follow up by the agency to WCS' application as "not at all unusual," said the initial response was supposed to answer about half of the questions submitted to the company.

McDonald described the request from the NRC as part of "the licensing dance that we are going to do for the next three years."

"It's actually a really good sign," McDonald said. "We submitted this 3,000-page document, and they came back pretty quickly in June, and said here's a bunch more stuff we need from you guys. What would have been a problem is if we don't hear from them for a year and then they go, well, we are missing all these pieces."

Groups opposed to the WCS' effort to store high-level nuclear waste in Andrews County pounced on Lombard's letter as a sign of key omissions that reflected unpreparedness.

"WCS failed to provide a lot of the information required by the NRC to assure this is a safe site," Tom "Smitty" Smith, the director of Public Citizen's Texas office, said in a statement.

"Why should we trust a company that can't get its paperwork complete to safely construct and operate a facility that could hold up to 40,000 metric tons of lethal nuclear waste for 40 or more years?"

But Conley described the agency's request for more information as routine. Staff expected to make fewer of them, Conley said in an email, but "it is not overly troubling given the large scope of the application and the number of different spent fuel storage systems being addressed in it."

Part of the NRC's review will include local hearings seeking input from the public about the scope of the agency's environmental assessment. WCS officials asked the NRC to start that process now, and Conley said the agency is considering that request.

Meanwhile, the NRC in April received a letter of intent from Holtec International, one of the nuclear industry's titans, to open a competing interim storage facility in Lea County, N.M. The effort is backed by the Eddy Lea Energy Alliance, a company formed by the governments of Carlsbad, Hobbs and Eddy and Lea counties. Like the proposed WCS

facility, Holtec International is proposing a long-term facility that could last 100 years but seek a license from the NRC for the first 40 years.

Another nuclear giant, Areva, backs the WCS project.

Both projects are driven by a lack of a permanent disposal for spent nuclear fuel rods the United States after Congress in 2010 nixed funding for the proposed site at Yucca Mountain in Nevada. Today, spent fuel is kept at nuclear reactors, while the federal government continues to take in money from utilities into a multi-billion dollar fund for a permanent disposal site.

A company that builds an interim disposal site could make billions, and Andrews County along with the State of Texas would share in that windfall. So far, Andrews has received about \$7.8 million in direct payments from disposal fees for the low-level waste that WCS buried at the site in the rural county during the past four years, according to figures provided by the company. The state's share has been about \$36 million.

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