

Testimony by

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On
Draft Recommendations by the
President's Blue Ribbon Commission
On America's Nuclear Future

before the

House Science, Space & Technology Subcommittee
Washington, DC

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COMMUNITY REUSE ORGANIZATION

two states, one future

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Introduction

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the draft recommendations of the President's Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Nuclear Future.

I am Rick McLeod, Executive Director of the Savannah River Site Community Reuse Organization -- or "SRSCRO"

The SRSCRO is a non-profit regional group supporting economic diversification and job creation in a five-county region of Georgia and South Carolina near the Department of Energy's Savannah River Site.

Our organization is unique across the DOE complex in that our area of interest covers multiple counties and two states.

Blue Ribbon Commission Draft Recommendations

The Blue Ribbon Commission's draft report issued in July included seven recommendations:

1. Develop an approach to siting and developing nuclear waste management and disposal facilities in the U.S. that is "adaptive, staged, consent-based, transparent, and standards- and science-based."
2. Create a new, single-purpose organization to develop and implement a focused, integrated program for the transportation, storage, and disposal of nuclear waste in the U.S.
3. Assure access by the nuclear waste management program to the balance in the Nuclear Waste Fund and to the revenues generated by annual nuclear waste fee payments.
4. Initiate prompt efforts to develop, as quickly as possible, one or more permanent deep geological facilities for the safe disposal of spent fuel and high-level nuclear waste.

5. Initiate prompt efforts to develop, as quickly as possible, one or more consolidated interim storage facilities as part of an integrated, comprehensive plan for managing the back end of the nuclear fuel cycle.
6. Provide stable, long-term support for research, development, and demonstration (RD&D) on advanced reactor and fuel cycle technologies that have the potential to offer substantial benefits relative to currently available technologies and for related workforce needs and skills development.
7. Provide international leadership to address global non-proliferation concerns and improve the safety and security of nuclear facilities and materials worldwide.

Halting Yucca Mountain is Wrong Decision

First, let me say that the individuals and groups I represent in South Carolina and Georgia continue to believe that the Administration's decision to halt work on Yucca Mountain is wrong headed and counter to the Nation's long-term best interests.

Our objection to the Administration's Yucca Mountain policy is well-known and highlighted by actions taken by our organization.

- We produced a widely-distributed community white paper designed to facilitate discussion and a regional and national consensus on safe, permanent nuclear waste disposal.
- We gathered resolutions from 22 governmental bodies and economic development groups in our region supporting continuation of the Yucca Mountain project.
- We held a well-covered press conference at the National Press Club in Washington to amplify our objections to the Administration's decision.
- We co-sponsored print ads as part of a national campaign to ask our elected officials and candidates where they stand on Yucca Mountain.

- We have communicated frequently with our state and Federal elected officials concerning our views and concerns.
- We appeared three times before the President’s Blue Ribbon Commission on America’s Energy Future.
- Most recently, we joined with 25 other organizations across the country in signing a letter to the U.S. Senate supporting funding resumption of the NRC’s review of the Yucca Mountain license application.

In short, we have mounted an extremely proactive community response in an effort to force reconsideration of the government’s ill-advised decision to halt work on Yucca Mountain, especially since Congress specifically stated so in the Nuclear Waste Policy Act and Yucca Mountain is still considered the “law” of the land.

DOE Should Reconsider its Position

We continue to urge DOE to reconsider its position and allow science and engineering – not politics -- to establish the most appropriate means for disposal of high-level defense nuclear waste.

And we applaud Congressional efforts ... including those of this committee, specifically the June 2011 report on Yucca Mountain ... to scrutinize the Administration’s actions with respect to Yucca Mountain and the lack of scientific integrity, openness, and transparency in its determination to terminate the project.

We continue to believe Yucca Mountain was – and is – the right answer for permanent nuclear waste disposal, and its completion should be pursued vigorously, especially for high-level defense waste. We note that the Blue Ribbon Commission did not address Yucca Mountain in its draft report at the direction of the Secretary of Energy. We consider this to be the “missing recommendation”.

Transparent, Science-Based Approach is Needed

With respect to the Blue Ribbon Commission’s recommendations, we fully agree with Recommendation #1 which calls for a consent-based, transparent and science-based approach to waste management solutions.

If a science-based approach were followed with transparency, we would be completing the Yucca Mountain project today.

High-Level Defense Waste Needs Separate Consideration

It should be pointed out that we are on record multiple times with our strongly held concerns that because of the Yucca Mountain decision high-level defense waste will continue to be stored at the Savannah River Site with no disposition path available, thus by default becoming the “de facto” Yucca Mountain.

On this point, we want to be extremely clear. In its final report, the Blue Ribbon Commission needs to de-couple high-level defense waste -- including the vitrified waste and used nuclear fuel from foreign and domestic research reactors -- from commercial spent fuel.

The waste is different. The quantity is different. The number of locations affected is different. The potential for future use is different. The legal and financial implications for the government are different.

Commercial spent fuel and high-level defense waste should be treated differently based on their unique characteristics and requirements for safe storage and retrieval. Specific, separate recommendations are needed for disposition of high-level defense waste.

New Federal Corporation Will Delay Progress

With respect to the Commission’s second recommendation, we share the view of those who fear that forming a federal corporation dedicated to managing nuclear wastes could further delay efforts to dispose of the waste, especially defense waste which has no other disposition path than a geologic repository.

All evidence points to the fact that disposal of defense waste at Savannah River Site is low among the Department of Energy’s priorities.

It is also a fact that considerable time, money and effort would have to be devoted to setting up a new Federal or quasi-Federal organization to oversee disposition.

Rather than create new bureaucracy, why not simply focus for a shorter period and for less money on just disposing of defense waste. A new organization just doesn’t seem to be a helpful solution in the current environment. We need solutions not more bureaucracy.

Nuclear Waste Fund Should Be Used for Its Purpose

Third, we fully agree that access by the nuclear waste management program to the balance in the Nuclear Waste Fund and to the revenues generated by annual nuclear waste fee payments should be assured.

Permanent Geologic Facility is Needed Soon

Fourth, we also fully agree with the Commission's recommendation that prompt efforts should be initiated to develop, as quickly as possible, one or more permanent deep geological facilities for the safe disposal of spent fuel and high-level nuclear waste. We believe Yucca Mountain is the first of those facilities.

"Interim" Should Be Legally Defined

The Commission's fifth recommendation is that we develop one or more interim storage facilities as quickly as possible.

While we appreciate the need for such storage, our concern centers on the term "interim." When it comes to nuclear waste, this is a relative term that is almost never associated with a fixed time frame.

Rather, it can mean anything -- from ten years to 500 years or more. "Interim" needs to be clearly and legally defined before communities such as ours can begin to address the potential and advisability of such storage.

In any event, our community will not support any interim storage of commercial spent fuel scenario unless a permanent solution is pursued at the same time.

This means progress toward a permanent repository for commercial spent fuel and high-level defense waste and/or a program to reprocess or recycle commercial used nuclear fuel.

Community support also requires removal of a sufficient quantity of waste currently stored at SRS and the re-commitment of processing used nuclear fuel currently stored at SRS in used fuel pools.

These two conditions -- along with ongoing health and safety monitoring ... proper regulatory oversight both at the local and State level ... and a legally binding

commitment to a final disposition plan – are essential to community support for an interim storage option for commercial spent fuel at SRS.

Fuel Cycle R&D is Needed; H Canyon Should Be Utilized

We strongly agree with Recommendation Six which calls for stable, long-term support for research, development, and demonstration on advanced reactor and fuel cycle technologies. Furthermore, we believe the Commission needs to make a specific recommendation regarding the preservation and use of H-Canyon as part of this R&D program.

H Canyon – as you know – is a one-of-a-kind facility of immense importance to DOE and the Nation.

It is the only large-scale DOE facility that can stabilize and separate DOE's inventory of complex plutonium materials into a form suitable for disposition.

It is the only facility that can prepare the large and growing inventory of research reactor fuel at the Savannah River Site for disposition ... while recovering valuable highly enriched uranium.

It is the only facility that can support engineering development and "hot" testing of alternate nuclear fuel cycles and advanced Small Nuclear Reactors.

We strongly urge the Blue Ribbon Commission to amend its Recommendation Number 7 to specifically recognize the critical role of H Canyon at the Savannah River Site in international non-proliferation efforts.

The Commission should acknowledge that H Canyon is a national treasure that should be fully deployed to complete the original plan of disposing of nuclear materials brought to SRS.

We believe DOE's decision to place H Canyon at the Savannah River Site in modified operational status is short-sighted, especially at a time when critical existing mission needs are unmet.

In our view, it is imperative to reinstate H Canyon to operational status – fully funded and fully staffed.

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Nuclear Waste Solution is Critical National Challenge

As we point out in our Yucca Mountain white paper, the challenge of properly disposing of nuclear waste touches every man, woman and child in America.

It speaks to public safety, to energy independence, to technology and innovation, to global competitiveness and economic leadership and to the political will to do what is right – what must be done for the good of our communities today and of future generations tomorrow.

I thank this Committee for its oversight and contribution to the national dialog. I urge you to carefully consider our comments and urge the Blue Ribbon Commission to incorporate our views into their final report.

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