In response to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission’s (NRC) June 30, 2010 Order, the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners (NARUC) respectfully suggests that no additional review of the June 29, 2010 Atomic Safety and Licensing Board’s LBP-10-11 Order (Board Order or Order) denying the Department of Energy’s (DOE’s) motion to withdraw in the above-referenced proceeding is necessary. Alternatively, if the full Commission chooses to review the Licensing Board Order, the Order should be upheld in all particulars.

While the Commission retains the inherent authority to take review of the Licensing Board Order as a matter of discretion, the Commission should decline review primarily because the Board has accurately pointed out the Department of Energy’s Withdrawal motion is fatally flawed and transparently at odds with the plain text of the controlling statute. It is rare for any agency to be presented with a motion that is flawed as the one filed by DOE in this proceeding. The Board Order presents a compelling, neutral, independent, and informed determination.
Additional review will be an incredible waste of NRC resources at a time when the federal government has very little resources to waste.


However, this record presents no real factual disputes. As the Board’s Order accurately points out:

- DOE has filed “its 17 volume 8,600-page construction authorization application” (page 1)
- DOE spent “decades” generating the report which is “undergirded by millions of pages of studies, reports, and related materials at a reported cost of over 10 billion dollars.” (page 2)
- DOE has conceded that in “the Secretary’s judgment” is “not that Yucca Mountain is unsafe or that there are flaws in the [Application],”(page 4)

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1 There are some facts presented as a basis for NARUC’s and others interventions, but the factual determinations about those interventions, along with the administrative record made by the Board to support its interpretation of the NWPA are entitled to deference under controlling cases cited, *supra*. The Board’s legal and factual analysis of NARUC’s intervention was also complete and accurate. NARUC will respond to any critiques of the Board’s analysis on reply.
- DOE acknowledges that it cannot withdraw the Application if that would be contrary to the statues passed by Congress (page 4).

These facts are incontrovertible – the last conceded and thus effectively stipulated to by DOE during the course of this proceeding.

More critical to the Board’s final legal determinations, there are no facts in the record to support the withdrawal application. No judge can express a different view of any proposed rationale that is not backed by facts present in the record presented for decision. As the Board Order points out at page 4, after conceding the Secretary has not decided that Yucca is unsafe or that there are flaws in the application, the supposed “factual justification” for the motion is that the Secretary believes “it is not a workable option and alternatives will better serve the public interest.”

Is there any factual evidence included in the motion or in the subsequent pleadings provided by DOE that provides any substantial support for the notion that the Yucca Mountain application is “unworkable”?

No.

Is there any evidence in the record that clearly demonstrates that “alternatives will better serve the public interest?”

No. Indeed, the only facts in the record – the 8,600 page application backed by decades of work and hundreds of studies – strongly suggest that the repository is both workable and necessarily superior to any speculative uncited and thus necessarily unproven alternatives.

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2 The Order quotes directly from DOE’s Reply at 31 n.102.

3 The administrative hearing record itself must provide evidence that supports (1) any findings concerning a dismissal, (2) any conditions imposed, and (3) any harm alleged. Duke Power Co., 16 NRC at 1134, citing LeCompte v. Mr. Chip, Inc., 528 F.2d at 604; 5 Moore's Federal Practice § 41.05(1) at 41-58.
Although the NRC does review legal determinations _de novo_, in this case there is simply no ambiguity in the law or the legislative history requiring any additional examination. Even if there _were_ some facts in the record that justified the Secretary’s policy call, the controlling statute makes clear the policy call is not his to make. It is the Legislative Branch’s decision—and they have already specified that the Yucca Mountain application will be reviewed by the NRC on the merits. The DOE’s frail and flawed legal theory fails to stand up under the most cursory examination. The Board Order provides a devastating, accurate, and comprehensive critique of DOE’s distorted view of the statute concluding, at page 12, noting the “language, structure, and legislative history of the NWPA all contravene the notion that Congress intended to allow DOE to terminate the NRC’s consideration of the Application.”

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4 The NRC has said "[a]s for conclusions of law, our standard of review is more searching. We review legal questions de novo. We will reverse a licensing board's legal rulings if they are 'a departure from or contrary to established law.'" _Southern Nuclear Operating Co. (Early Site Permit for Vogtle ESP Site),_ Nuc. Reg. Rptr. P 31608, 2009 WL 5246219 *5 (N.R.C.) CLI-10-05, (January 2, 2010), quoting _Tennessee Valley Authority (Watts Bar Nuclear Plant, Unit 1; Sequoyah Plant, Units 1 & 2; Browns Ferry Nuclear Plant, Units 1, 2 & 3),_ CLI-04-24, 60 NRC 160, 190 (2004).

5 For example, the Order holds, at 7, the NWPA requires the Secretary of Energy to submit to NRC a license application for construction authorization once Congress approves the geologic repository site. Congresses’ approval of Yucca Mountain in 2002 required DOE’s to submit the application. Once submitted, NWPA Section 114(d) specifies the NRC “shall consider” the Application and “issue a final decision approving or disapproving the issuance of a construction authorization.” 42 U.S.C. § 10134(d); Order at 7. The Licensing Board Order reveals how the text, structure, and legislative history of the NWPA demonstrate DOE lacks authority to withdraw the application. Order at 4-9. The Board Order also eviscerates the remaining DOE arguments finding: (i) DOE has no authority provided by the Atomic Energy Act which can trump the more recent and specific NWPA mandates, Order at 11-13; (ii) NRC regulations do not allow a withdrawal “as of right” for an application filed in response to a statutory mandate and subject to a separate NWPA directive that the applicable regulations do not apply to the extent that they jeopardize NRC’s duty to render a final decision on the merits of the license application, Order at 13-16; (iii) DOE is not entitled to deference where Congress has clearly spoken, Order at 16-17; (iv) DOE is not a “voluntary” applicant, and Congress did not intend for DOE to be treated as such, Order at 17; and (v) that the establishment of a Blue Ribbon Commission does not alter DOE’s or NRC’s duties under the NWPA, Order at 18-19.
It is extremely unlikely DOE or any proponent of the motion can present any credible critique of the Board decision on the merits.

It is also unlikely any opponent of the motion, including NARUC, can significantly improve on the Board’s articulate explanation of the gaping flaws in the DOE motion. As the NRC Commissioners will undoubtedly read the Board decision, NARUC will not waste the NRC’s time by regurgitating those arguments here. We will, however, respond to any new arguments presented by others on reply.

There are also prudential considerations auguring against additional NRC investments of staff and resources in this proceeding. As noted, supra, the DOE’s proffered rational is so weak that additional NRC review is superfluous. The Board has done an excellent job and in any case, there is no question that the United States Courts of Appeal will be the final arbiter of the legal issues presented. The Board explicitly recognized the Court’s role in its initial decision to hold the case in abeyance\(^6\) as did the full Commission when asked the Board to conduct its review based on an incredibly compressed timeline to assure the Board’s analysis could provide some input in the pending Court appeals, where the final legal issues will ultimately be resolved.\(^7\)

The United States Court of Appeals is already poised to address the crucial issues raised by the DOE’s motion. Initial briefs have already been filed.

\(^6\) See Memorandum and Order (Suspending Briefing and Consideration of Withdrawal Motion) (Apr. 6, 2010), at 9 (unpublished), where “the Board concludes that the pending actions in the Court of Appeals will likely yield quicker and more authoritative resolution of most if not all relevant legal issues.”

\(^7\) See U.S. Dep’t of Energy (High Level Waste Repository), CLI-10-13, 71 NRC __, __ (slip op. at 4- 5) (Apr. 23, 2010), noting “[t]he Board understandably has sought to manage this case with an eye toward the efficient use of NRC resources and in anticipation of an authoritative legal ruling from the D.C. Circuit on DOE’s effort to withdraw its Yucca Mountain application …[however] judicial review may well benefit from NRC’s consideration of the issues surrounding DOE’s motion.”
To assure the Court gets the full benefit of the Board’s careful analysis, the NRC should immediately certify the Board Order as a final agency decision ripe for judicial review.

Moreover, the consolidated appeals that are at the heart of the pending court action were filed before DOE filed the motion to withdraw in this NRC docket. DOE’s March 2010 filing of the motion to withdraw before the Board did not divest the Court of its original and exclusive jurisdiction granted by statute over the direct actions alleging violations of the NWPA. Even if the NRC was not obviously anxious to assure (i) efficient use of taxpayer funded resources and (ii) that the Board’s Decision informed the Court’s decision, where a federal court suit addressing identical legal issues is well underway, abstention by the NRC “would appear to be called for by considerations of comity between court and agency.” In the Matter of Pub. Serv. Co. of N.H., et al., 4 N.R.C. 365 (1976). In such circumstances, the Commission “should allow the court to act on the matter first.” Id. These considerations carry even more force where, as here, Congress has selected the Court of Appeals as the original and exclusive forum for challenges to actions and decisions alleged to be in violation of the NWPA.
CONCLUSION

The issues presented for review are currently being considered by the Court of Appeals. The Board’s decision incinerates DOE’s legal rationale beyond rehabilitation. Moreover, both efficiency and principles of comity compel the Commission to forego any additional review of the Licensing Board Order and certify it as a final agency decision ripe for judicial review. If review is undertaken, the Licensing Board’s correct interpretation of the NWPA should be upheld in toto.

DATED this 9th day of July, 2010

Signed (electronically) by JAMES BRADFORD RAMSAY

James Bradford Ramsay
GENERAL COUNSEL
Robin J. Lunt
ASSISTANT GENERAL COUNSEL

1101 Vermont Avenue, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20005
Telephone: 202-898-2200

Attorneys for Intervenor,
National Association of Regulatory
Utility Commissioners
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION

BEFORE THE COMMISSION

In the Matter of                              Docket No. 63-001-HLW
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY                  ASLBP No. 09-892-HLW-CAB04
(License Application for Geologic          July 9, 2010
Repository at Yucca Mountain)

CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE

I, James Bradford Ramsay, hereby certify that copies of the foregoing have been served upon the following persons by Electronic Information Exchange.
Counsel for State of Nevada
Egan, Fitzpatrick, Malsch & Lawrence, PLLC
1750 K Street, NW, Suite 350
Washington, DC  20006
Martin G. Malsch, Esq.
mmalsch@nuclearlawyer.com
Susan Montesi:
smontesi@nuclearlawyer.com
Egan, Fitzpatrick, Malsch & Lawrence, PLLC
12500 San Pedro Avenue, Suite 555
San Antonio, TX  78216
Laurie Borski, Paralegal
lborski@nuclearlawyer.com
Charles J. Fitzpatrick, Esq.
cfitzpatrick@nuclearlawyer.com
John W. Lawrence, Esq.
jlawrence@nuclearlawyer.com

Bureau of Government Affairs
Nevada Attorney General
100 N. Carson Street
Carson City, NV  89701
Marta Adams, Chief Deputy Attorney General
madams@ag.nv.gov

Nevada Agency for Nuclear Projects
Nuclear Waste Project Office
1761 East College Parkway, Suite 118
Carson City, NV  89706
Steve Frishman, Tech. Policy Coordinator
steve.frishman@gmail.com
Susan Lynch, Administrator of Technical Prgms
szeee@nuc.state.nv.us

Counsel for Lincoln County, Nevada
Whipple Law Firm
1100 S. Tenth Street
Las Vegas, NV  89017
Annie Bailey, Legal Assistant
baileys@lcturbonet.com
Adam L. Gill, Esq.
adam.whipplelaw@yahoo.com
Eric Hinckley, Law Clerk
erichinckley@yahoo.com
Bret Whipple, Esq.
bretwhipple@nomademail.com

Lincoln County District Attorney
P. O. Box 60
Pioche, NV  89403
Gregory Barlow, Esq.
lcda@lcturbonet.com

Lincoln County Nuclear Oversight Program
P.O. Box 1068
Caliente, NV  89008
Connie Simkins, Coordinator
jcciac@co.lincoln.nv.us

For Lincoln County, Nevada
Intertech Services Corporation
PO Box 2008
Carson City, NV  89702
Mike Baughman, Consultant
mikebaughman@charter.net

Counsel for Nye County, Nevada
Ackerman Senterfitt
801 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, #600
Washington, DC  20004
Robert Andersen, Esq.
robert.andersen@akerman.com

Counsel for Nye County, Nevada
Jeffrey VanNiel, Esq.
530 Farrington Court
Las Vegas, NV  89123
nbrjdvn@gmail.com
Nye County Regulatory/Licensing Advisor  
18160 Cottonwood Rd. #265  
Sunriver, OR 97707  
Malachy Murphy, Esq. 
mrmurphy@chamberscable.com

Nye Co. Nuclear Waste Repository Project Office  
2101 E. Calvada Boulevard, Suite 100  
Pahrump, NV 89048  
Zoie Choate, Secretary 
zchoate@co.nye.nv.us  
Sherry Dudley, Admin. Technical Coordinator 
sdudley@co.nye.nv.us

Clark County, Nevada  
500 S. Grand Central Parkway  
Las Vegas, NV 98155  
Phil Klevorick, Sr. Mgmt Analyst 
klevorick@co.clark.nv.us  
Elizabeth A. Vibert, Deputy District Attorney 
Elizabeth.Vibert@ccdanv.com

Counsel for Clark County, Nevada  
Jennings, Strouss & Salmon  
8330 W. Sahara Avenue, #290  
Las Vegas, NV 89117  
Bryce Loveland, Esq. 
bloveland@jsslaw.com

Counsel for Eureka County, Nevada  
Harmon, Curran, Speilberg & Eisenberg, LLP  
1726 M. Street N.W., Suite 600  
Washington, DC 20005-3305  
Alan I. Robbins, Esq. 
arobbins@jsslaw.com  
Debra D. Roby, Esq. 
droby@jsslaw.com

Eureka County Public Works  
PO Box 714  
Eureka, NV 89316  
Ronald Damele, Director 
r damele@eurekanv.org

Nuclear Waste Advisory for Eureka County, Nevada  
1983 Maison Way  
Carson City, NV 89703  
Abigail Johnson, Consultant 
eurekanrc@gmail.com

For Eureka County, Nevada  
NWOP Consulting, Inc.  
1705 Wildcat Lane  
Ogden, UT 84403  
Loreen Pitchford, Consultant 
lpitchford@comcast.net
Counsel for Churchill, Esmeralda, Lander, and Mineral Counties, Nevada
Armstrong Teasdale, LLP
1975 Village Center Circle, Suite 140
Las Vegas, NV  89134-6237
Jennifer A. Gores, Esq.
jgores@armstrongteasdale.com
Robert F. List, Esq.
rlist@armstrongteasdale.com

Esmeralda County Repository Oversight Program- Yucca Mountain Project
PO Box 490
Goldfield, NV  89013
Edwin Mueller, Director
muellered@msn.com

Mineral County Nuclear Projects Office
P.O. Box 1600
Hawthorne, NV  89415
Linda Mathias, Director
yuccainfo@mineralcountynv.org

For City of Caliente, Lincoln County, and White Pine County, Nevada
P.O. Box 126
Caliente, NV  89008
Jason Pitts, LSN Administrator
jayson@idtservices.com

White Pine County, Nevada
Office of the District Attorney
801 Clark Street, #3
Ely, NV  89301
Richard Sears, District Attorney
rwsears@wpcda.org

White Pine County Nuclear Waste Project Office
959 Campton Street
Ely, NV  89301
Mike Simon, Director
wpnucwst1@mwpower.net
Melanie Martinez, Sr. Management Assistant
wpnucwst2@mwpower.net

For White Pine County, Nevada
Intertech Services Corporation
PO Box 2008
Carson City, NV  89702
Mike Baughman, Consultant
bigboff@aol.com

Counsel for Inyo County, California
Greg James, Attorney at Law
710 Autumn Leaves Circle
Bishop, CA  93514
E-Mail: gljames@earthlink.net

Inyo County Yucca Mountain Repository Assessment Office
P. O. Box 367
Independence, CA  93526-0367
Alisa M. Lembke, Project Analyst
alembke@inyocounty.us

Counsel for Inyo County, California
Law Office of Michael Berger
479 El Sueno Road
Santa Barbara, CA  93110
Michael Berger, Esq.
michael@lawofficeofmichaelberger.com
Robert Hanna, Esq.
robert@lawofficeofmichaelberger.com
For State of South Carolina
Davidson & Lindemann, P.A.
1611 Devonshire Drive
P.O. Box 8568
Columbia, SC 29202
Kenneth P. Woodington, Esq.
kwoodington@dml-law.com

For Aiken County, South Carolina
Haynesworth Sinkler Boyd, PA
1201 Main Street, Suite 2200
P. O. Box 11889
Columbia, SC 29211-1889
Thomas R. Gottshall, Esq.
tgottshall@hsblawfirm.com
Ross Shealy, Esq.
rshealy@hsblawfirm.com

For the State of Washington
Office of the Attorney General
P. O. Box 40117
Olympia, WA 98504-0117
Andrew A. Fitz, Esq.
andyf@atg.wa.gov
Michael L. Dunning, Esq.
michaeld@atg.wa.gov
H. Lee Overton, Esq.
leeo1@atg.wa.gov
Diana MacDonald
dianam@atg.wa.gov

[Signed Electronically by James Bradford Ramsay]

Dated at Washington, DC
this 9th day of July 2010

James Bradford Ramsay
GENERAL COUNSEL
Robin J. Lunt
ASSISTANT GENERAL COUNSEL

1101 Vermont Avenue, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20005
Telephone: 202-898-2200

Attorneys for Intervenor,
National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners
ADDITIONAL CERTIFICATION

Availability of Material

As required by 10 C.F.R. § 2.1012(b) and 10 C.F.R. §2.1003, the undersigned also has made a good faith effort to substantially comply with the “Availability of Material” requirements, 10 C.F.R. § 2.1003. NARUC has been in communication with Daniel J. Graser, the NRC’s Licensing and Support Network Administrator to obtain technical guidance to comply with this provision.

[Signed Electronically by James Bradford Ramsay]

Dated at Washington, DC
this 9th day of July 2010

James Bradford Ramsay
GENERAL COUNSEL
Robin J. Lunt
ASSISTANT GENERAL COUNSEL

1101 Vermont Avenue, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20005
Telephone: 202-898-2200

Attorneys for Intervenor,
National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners