NIRS Blasts Dept. of Energy Yucca Mountain Decision

National environmental, public interest, and safe energy organizations blasted Energy Secretary Spence Abraham’s recommendation today that Yucca Mountain, Nevada be developed into the country’s repository for high-level atomic waste. Citing intense earthquake and volcanic activity at the site, the risks of transporting the highly radioactive wastes cross-country, as well as the proposed dump’s huge and still rising costs, the groups charged that Abraham’s recommendation is based on politics, not science.

“Yucca Mountain is smack dab in the middle of one of the most active earthquake zones in the country,” said Michael Mariotte, director of Nuclear Information and Resource Service (NIRS), the information and networking center for citizens and environmental organizations concerned about nuclear power, radioactive waste, radiation, and sustainable energy issues. “The dozens of fault lines that crisscross the proposed dumpsite have fractured the rock, creating pathways that would eventually leak deadly radiation into the drinking water supply below,” Mariotte said.

In the past 25 years alone, well over 600 earthquakes of 2.5 or greater on the Richter Scale have struck within 50 miles of Yucca Mountain. In 1992, a 5.6 quake cracked walls, shattered windows, and did a million dollars damage to the Department of Energy (DOE ) field office studying the site. A 1999 quake derailed a train on a railway that could be used to haul nuclear waste to Yucca Mountain.

“Abraham and DOE have completely ignored the risks of accidents or terrorist attacks upon nuclear waste shipments that could spew deadly radiation into the environment,” said Kevin Kamps, nuclear waste specialist at NIRS. “Each and every atomic waste train and truck passing through major urban population centers and the agricultural heartland would be a potential terrorist target. Such risks represent radioactive Russian roulette on our roads and rails,” said Kamps.

DOE studies show that the Yucca Mountain Project would require decades to transport many tens of thousands of high-level atomic waste train and truck shipments through 45 States past the homes, schools, and workplaces of 50 million Americans. DOE calculated that a severe accident releasing radiation in a rural area would contaminate 42 square miles, costing $620 million and taking 15 months to clean up.

“DOE has already wasted over $5 billion on the Yucca Mountain boondoggle, and plans on wasting over $50 billion more if this dump goes forward,” said Diane D’Arrigo, NIRS Radioactive Waste Project director. “It would be wise to cut our losses now, and start looking for some real answers to the nuclear waste dilemma.”
With Yucca’s future costs predicted to top $60 billion and only $10 billion currently in the Nuclear Waste Fund supplied by nuclear utility ratepayers, the looming shortfall of tens of billions of dollars would have to be picked up by taxpayers. Meanwhile, in December 2001, a U.S. General Accounting Office investigation found 293 items that need further scientific work before a determination on the Yucca site could be made. The GAO predicted it could take four years to complete that work. But the Energy Department made its decision less than a month later.

“Abraham’s recommendation has nothing to do with sound science and everything to do with corrupt politics,” said Mary Olson of NIRS Southeast office in Asheville, North Carolina. “Yucca Mountain is the Bush Administration’s false ‘solution’ to the nuclear waste problem which they’ll now try to use to advocate the building of a new generation of nuclear reactors,” said Olson.

On May 16, 2001 President George W. Bush presented his Administration’s National Energy Policy, the product of a controversial task force headed by Vice President Dick Cheney. With Energy Secretary Abraham and Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Christie Todd Whitman standing beside him, Bush called for the construction of new nuclear power reactors for the first time in decades. Bush called upon his Cabinet officials to expedite the repository approval process. EPA released its Yucca Mountain regulations just three weeks later. Several environmental groups have sued EPA, charging that the regulations are much too weak and threaten public health and safety.

“The Bush Administration’s National Energy Policy is built upon secretive meetings between Dick Cheney and energy CEO’s,” said Mariotte. “The decision to move ahead with Yucca Mountain and build new reactors is just as bankrupt as Enron.”

Yucca Mountain is legally limited to accepting a maximum of 70,000 tons of high-level radioactive waste. Operating current reactors for decades into the future will generate more waste than Yucca would be allowed to hold. Building new reactors would add to that waste surplus. A second repository would be needed. The Nuclear Waste Policy Act requires that second repository be located in the Eastern United States.

“What is our alternative to Yucca Mountain?” asked Kamps. “Simple, stop making nuclear waste in the first place. Phase out nuclear power and replace it with ready to go conservation, efficiency, and renewable energy sources. Wind turbines aren’t terrorist targets like nuclear power plants, and don’t generate forever deadly atomic garbage. The nuclear waste that already exists is certainly a problem, but Yucca Mountain is certainly not the answer.”

Abraham’s recommendation sends the Yucca Mountain decision to the White House. If President Bush approves Yucca Mountain, the State of Nevada has pledged to veto. The decision would then go to the U.S. Congress, where Assistant Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada has vowed to attempt to block it in the Senate. Even if approved by Congress, the State of Nevada and environmental groups have vowed to battle it in the Courts. Three lawsuits against the Yucca Mountain repository are already under way.