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Blended Waste Fact Sheet

The Proposal
EnergySolutions wants to blend hotter class B&C nuclear power plant resins with less-hot waste and dispose of the resulting "blended waste" mixture in the West Desert. The blending, branded SempraSafe, is a joint venture with Swedish nuclear wastes giant Studsvik and would take place at their facility in Tennessee.

EnergySolutions sought permission from the Utah Division of Radiation Control to begin dumping SempraSafe waste in Clive, Utah, back in Feb. 2011. In Dec. 2011, the Division announced it would allow the company to begin dumping those wastes immediately, even as regulators ordered EnergySolutions to do a technical study to ensure it's safe to dump wastes.

A public comment period on the state's decision begins on Jan. 17, 2012 and lasts until Feb. 17. Comments should be directed to radpublic@utah.gov.

Blended Waste: Our Concerns

Blended wastes gut the state's ban on Class B & C wastes. When the State Legislature and Gov. Jon Huntsman enacted the state ban in 2005, they were seeking to shield Utah from the hottest slice of low-level waste from nuclear power plants. That ban was overwhelmingly supported by the public -- 84% of Utahns, according to a Deseret News poll.

What kinds of Class B & C wastes have been kept out of Utah since 2005? There are several kinds, but one significant segment is resin waste from nuclear power plants – the very material which EnergySolutions proposes to blend in Tennessee and dump in Utah.

Approving SempraSafe, thus, allows EnergySolutions to bring to Utah the same material that the 2005 ban has kept out. It renders the ban meaningless.

SempraSafe locks Utah in as the sole dumping ground for the nation's low-level radioactive waste. EnergySolutions already takes the vast majority of the nation's low-level radioactive waste from nuclear power plants – by volume. But, at least, we've been protected from the hottest segment of that waste, thanks to the 2005 ban.

But, now, the Clive site will be the main site for dumping nearly all of that waste, hot and not-so-hot, discouraging the rest of the country from developing its own regional solutions to disposing of nuclear waste (as Congress intended.)

Allowing Utah to accept blended waste ignores the fact that there is another site which can take hotter wastes: A facility in Andrews, Texas which is licensed to accept Class B and C nuclear wastes — as is, without any need to treat or blend them first — directly from nuclear power plants.

If the state approves blending, it is a clear reversal of previous policy. Ever since the 2005 ban was passed, many stakeholders – the Radiation Control Board, the Division of Radiation Control and Gov. Gary Herbert – made clear they opposed efforts by EnergySolutions to evade that ban.

For example, in June 2010, the Salt Lake Tribune reported, "State regulators, the Radiation Control Board and Gov. Gary Herbert have objected to blending when it's done to change the waste's classification, thus circumventing Utah's five-year-old ban on Class B and C waste..."

Just last year, the Division, the Board and the Governor all said they were opposed to blending since it seemed a clear effort to circumvent Utah law. What has changed?

Approving SempraSafe would significantly increase the total radioactivity that comes to Utah each year. In 2010, EnergySolutions brought waste containing 7,450 curies of radioactivity to Utah. Analysis of a technical survey of nuclear power plants suggests that blending could bring an additional 19,184 to 28,470 curies of resins to Utah every year. That would triple to quadruple the current amount.

In other words, allowing SempraSafe waste in Clive could lead to as much radioactivity being dumped at the site in the next two-and-a-half years – as was dumped there since the facility opened 21 years ago.

It makes no sense for state regulators to order a safety study – while letting EnergySolutions start dumping wastes immediately. Rushing to allow SempraSafe is particularly poor policy. In its Dec. decision, regulators ruled it's necessary to do a technical study to make sure that the Clive facility is a safe location for dumping hotter nuclear waste.

But, bizarrely, the decision allows EnergySolutions to begin dumping large quantities of blended nuclear waste here immediately, before the study has even begun, let alone been completed.

Blended Waste: Share Your Concerns

Please tell state regulators what you think of their blended waste decision: Send your comments before Feb. 17 to radpublic@utah.gov, or via HEAL's online comment form.