



Holtec, NRC hold meeting in Gallup

A meeting was held May 21 at the Downtown Gallup Conference Center regarding the possibility of nuclear waste being transported through Gallup and parts of the Navajo Nation by Holtec International.

The nuclear waste would be placed at proposed nuclear waste storage site in southeastern New Mexico in Lea County between Hobbs and Carlsbad.

Along with Holtec, the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission was on hand as well for the public meeting to gather feedback on what features they should study to determine the environmental

impacts of a proposed nuclear waste storage site.

This is part of the beginning of likely a three year process to determine whether NRC would grant a license to Holtec to build their facility and to transport waste to New Mexico.

Based outside of Washington, D.C., Holtec constructs the containers that store radioactive waste from nuclear power plants. It's a steel canister within a concrete canister. The current policy is to bury deep underground at Yucca Mountain in Nevada, and for a variety of reasons, primarily politics, that has not happened to date.

Meanwhile, Holtec offers an interim solution to build the facility in the Land of Enchantment.

Holtec International Program Director Ed Mayer said the purpose of the meeting was also to educate the public and hear their concerns about the project.

"It's the NRC's meeting and it's a scoping meeting," he said. "We submitted our license submission, and the NRC wants to hear from the general public just to make sure that the scope of our submission was correct. If there's things that we didn't cover, and the general public knows about, the general public has the opportunity to tell the NRC [sic] increase the scope of our submission so it covers the correct items."

According to Mayer, the plan is to transport the waste from commercial nuclear reactors around the country to southeastern New Mexico by rail, which presumably would come through various parts of New Mexico, including Gallup. He wants to educate the public on Holtec's safety measures, and to address issues that have arisen.

"I would say that we've already addressed the hard issues," he said. "Our technologies are the safest technologies on earth. Our storage it's the safest in the world. It's not the cart before the horse, we've had the horse before the cart, we've addressed those concerns already. What we want to do is educate the general public and make sure they understand our technologies. I think if they understand our technologies, it will take a little bit, they'll be more comfortable with the facility."

David McIntyre, of NRC's public affairs division, discussed the NRC standards in regard to the comments that were heard in the meeting.

"Well, our standards are regulatory standards for safety and environmental protection are pretty strict," he said. "We won't change our standards because of what we hear today, but what we hear tonight would potentially influence what we look at for environmental review and that's what we're here for. I want to be careful and say that what we hear tonight won't have an impact because it will, we're not holding a yea or nay referendum, although it'll sound like that at times. Of what comments we get through this process, we'll definitely influence our review."

Many concerned citizens got the chance to speak and voice their opinions, such as Jonathan Perry, a Navajo Nation Council delegate.

"My purpose is to state the positions and concerns that my chapters have with the majority of my colleagues on the council," he said. "In regarding nuclear development, nuclear transportation, and uranium mining. We oppose this project, we oppose the transportation within the region, including Gallup and portions of the Navajo Nation through railway."

Perry also stated the concern of emergency response and where would it come from, and does the area have adequate support should an emergency arise. Albuquerque is the nearest location with a hazmat team to respond, and even at that, are they able to handle a major risk should it arise?

"What we found out that the nearest hazmat team that can respond to anything of this magnitude is Albuquerque – there is nothing local. So that imposes a major risk. The other part is the infrastructure; the roads, railway … are we adequate to support this type of project," Perry said.

Right now, according to Perry, the roads are not suitable for major transportation, and so this is a major concern. The other portion is the health and contamination of the environment.

“With the history on the Navajo Nation regarding uranium mining, this is still a major concern,” he said. “There’s a lot of misconception that nuclear energy is clean energy, but they forget the first portion which is uranium mining and transportation, so that’s a major issue as well.”

Concerned citizens who know about uranium mining and the effects of it is, Mervyn Tilden of Eastern Navajo Dine’ Against Uranium Mining.

“I think the main emphasis should be the safety of the people along the corridor of that leads to the eventual storage site of this nuclear waste,” Tilden said. “There has been little information given to the people and I think that one of the most important things that needs to be included in this process is public involvement. Not only the experts of the NRC, or the state of New Mexico, or Navajo Nation, but the people themselves who are going to be impacted.”

One audience member had addressed the concern of the lack of city officials, including the mayor and New Mexico Rep. Patty Lundstrom, D-Gallup.

Similar meetings were held in other places in New Mexico.

For more information on Holtec, contact (856) 797-0900 or visit website www.Holtec.com

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For the Sun