

U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission uses pandemic to push forward nuclear waste dump

Written by By Leona Morgan
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Co-founder of Diné No Nukes and the Albuquerque-based Nuclear Issues Study Group

New Mexico is again being targeted as a national sacrifice zone by both the nuclear industry and the U.S. government in one of the most blatant forms of environmental racism.

Anyone from the Four Corners region has most likely heard about uranium mining and milling, and those of us from this area know about or have firsthand experience with the many health and environmental impacts. But how many residents from uranium-impacted areas know where that uranium goes after it is extracted from our Mother Earth? The simple answer is that uranium is used for either nuclear weapons or nuclear energy.

When used for nuclear energy, uranium is processed in several stages into fuel for nuclear power plants to produce electricity. Various types of hazardous and radioactive wastes are produced at each stage, with the most deadly and most radioactive being produced at the power plant, referred to as “high-level radioactive waste” or “spent nuclear fuel.”

At the onset of the nuclear energy industry, the federal government knew that the waste created required a highly specified type of storage facility that didn't exist, yet allowed private companies to create this waste for decades without a proper permanent storage resulting in tax-payer monies paying private companies to store the waste. Today, there is still no permanent place. Yucca Mountain in Nevada was a proposed site, but was strongly resisted by the public, the state and elected officials, and the Western Shoshone indigenous nation, and is no longer funded by congress.

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With the nuclear power era is coming to an end, as more and more nuclear power plants are shutting down, there is an anxiousness to find a place to put the waste. In the meantime, without a permanent dump, there are now proposals to build temporary or Consolidated “Interim” Storage Facilities in New Mexico and Texas that would hold the waste until a permanent storage facility is designed and built. This means transport of this highly toxic waste twice across the country (mostly by rail) or possibly, the temporary dumps becoming permanent.

According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration website, “At the end of December 2019, the United States had 96 operating commercial nuclear reactors at 58 nuclear power plants in 29 states ... [and] as of November 2019, there were 17 shut down commercial nuclear power reactors at 16 sites in various stages of decommissioning.” In other words, there have been 104 reactors in total, with some already closed or in the process of closing, located mostly east of the Mississippi and *all* with highly lethal waste on-site that locals want moved out of their communities.

Enter Holtec and Eddy-Lea Energy Alliance.

Holtec is applying to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) for a license to build and operate a consolidated interim storage (CIS) facility, halfway between Carlsbad and Hobbs. The license application is moving through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, and currently is in a public comment period for the draft environmental impact statement (DEIS), with a deadline of Sept. 22. Holtec’s plan is a 20-phase project to build a facility that will hold up to 173,600 metric tons of high-level radioactive waste, and the NRC license would last up to forty years with two possible extensions, totaling at least 120 years.

According to the Government Accountability Office website, “The U.S. commercial power industry alone has generated more waste ... than any other country—nearly 80,000 metric tons.” Holtec’s proposal is more than double that.

During the NEPA Scoping period, the NRC held five in-person meetings around the state to take public comment, including in Gallup in May 2018. This year, despite urgent appeals from all of New Mexico’s congressional delegation to pause the NEPA process until it is safe to hold public meetings, the NRC substituted the in-person meetings for online webinars that require

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both internet and phone connection to allow participants to see NRC's slides and to make comments. In NRC's slideshow, they claim that there will be "no disproportionately high and adverse impacts to minority or low-income populations" from Holtec's proposal, as they measure only within a 50 mile radius of the proposed site.

New Mexico as a whole is a majority people of color state and as most of us know in the rural areas, there is slow or no internet access and sometimes even no reliable cell or landline service. NRC is obviously using the international crises to move forward a project that opponents insist is illegal to begin with under the National Nuclear Waste Policy Act, as amended. The nuclear industry and federal government are so desperate to have a place to put nuclear power plant waste that they are effectively silencing the voices of the most impacted communities during a pandemic, and outright ignoring expressed concerns from our governor, the state land commissioner, and our full congressional delegation.

There are still many questions that remain unanswered, including why such a huge facility? And who will pay for accidents when they happen?

It is egregious that New Mexico, as a state already overburdened and disproportionately affected by radioactive waste storage, is facing more! Despite lessons learned about the long-lived environmental and health impacts from uranium production and other nuclear facilities in this state, we can thank the folks at the limited liability company Eddy-Lea Energy Alliance in southeastern New Mexico who have taken it upon themselves to tell folks living near nuclear power plants that New Mexico welcomes their waste. They have invited Holtec, a corrupt and racist, international company into our state. You can just google the words: "Holtec" and "corruption" to find evidence of this company's history of fraud, bribery, and outright dishonesty at its headquarters in New Jersey, nationally, and internationally—including here in New Mexico, claiming they controlled the mineral rights under the site which is actually under that State Land Office.

As a Diné person, I see this project as a national crisis in itself and we should not rush to any poor band-aid solution until more scientific research has been done by credible and certified third parties. The biggest concern I have is the transport across the country by rail, as this stuff can expose bystanders to radiation and accidents. As two of our sacred mountains are along the railway, what does this mean for the future of those places and our relationship with them if they should be affected by possible accidents?

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This proposal by Holtec and a second one by Waste Control Specialist (just forty miles east of Holtec) must be stopped! They are outright forms of environmental racism and nuclear colonialism. To stop these projects, it is not enough for individuals to send public comments to an agency that is bending in favor of industry, but to be vigilant and have a diversity of tactics including community actions and even cultural protocols.

This is just the beginning of a longer process of what to do with this waste. As both political parties favor nuclear energy development as a false solution to climate change, we will always have a target on our backs with pushes for new uranium mining and a place to put the high-level radioactive waste. You can send public comments and also pass resolutions in your communities as a way to help stop these proposals. Thank you to McKinley County and the City of Gallup for doing so already!

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