

Solving the Waste Conundrum

PREPARING THE YUCCA MOUNTAIN FACILITY

BY SALVATORE SALAMONE

WITH NEW NUCLEAR PLANTS ON THE drawing boards for the first time in decades, the question of radioactive waste disposal once again looms large.

“Before we consider expanding the capacity of nuclear power, the industry has to adequately address safety, security, waste and proliferation issues,” said Alden Meyer, director of strategy and policy at the Union of Concerned Scientists. Meyer’s comments were in response to a June report by the Keystone Center on the potential role of nuclear power in addressing global warming.

New plants will need a contract to deal with spent fuel before they get a license. Edward “Ward” Sproat, director of the Department of Energy’s Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management, which oversees the Yucca Mountain Project, said the government is committed to getting a new contract or an amendment to the existing contract in place as soon as possible. “This is a

very high priority,” said Sproat.

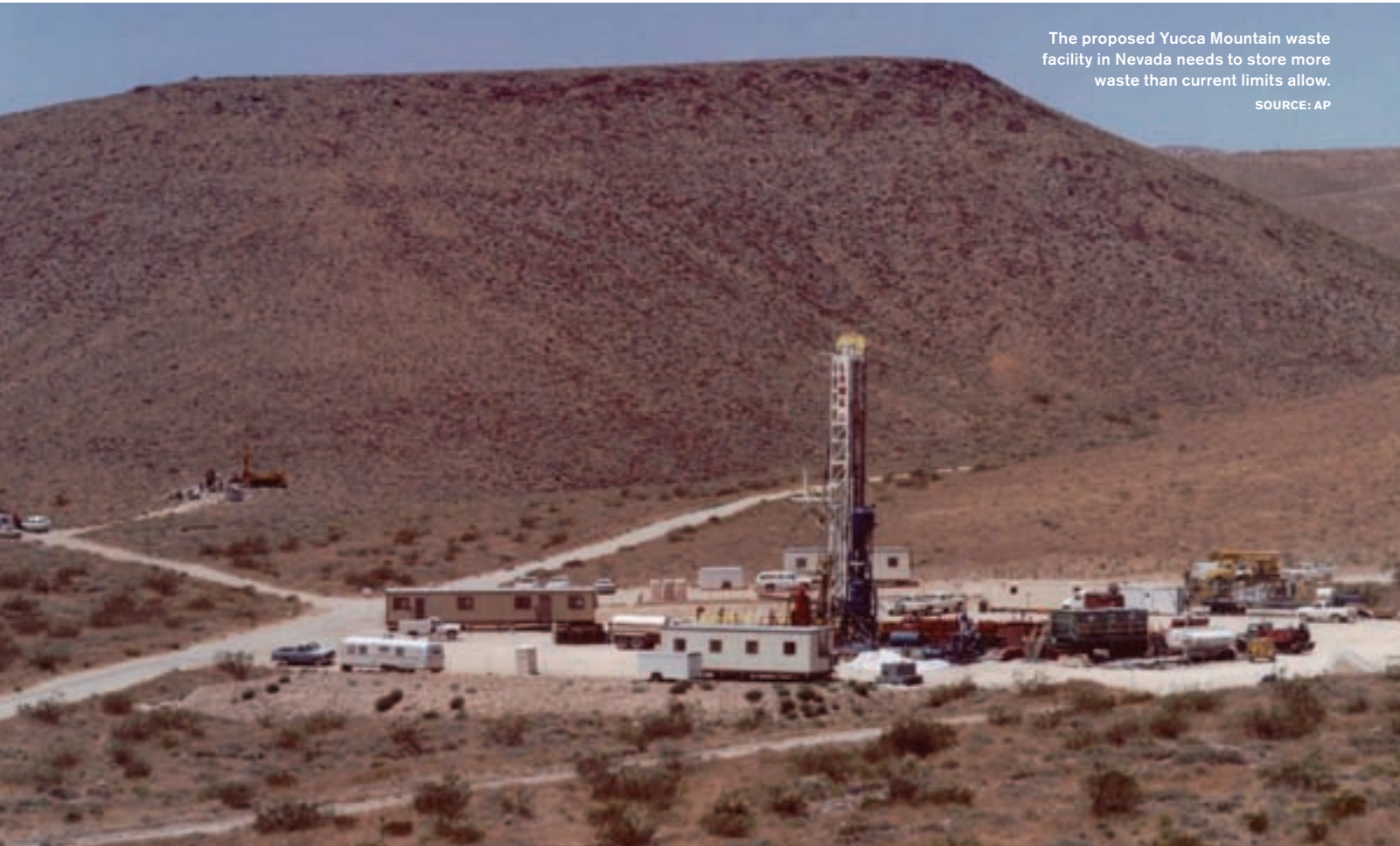
Unfortunately, the problem is not just how to deal with the spent fuel of new plants. Existing nuclear plant waste designated for storage in Yucca Mountain, once it is completed, will exceed the facility’s 70,000 metric ton limit by 2010.

The Bush administration has sent a proposal to Congress to remove the capacity limit. This proposal has languished. Sproat notes that if the 70,000 ton limit is not removed, “we will need a second facility just for the existing plants.”

There are several factors that might help bolster the case for expanding the capacity of the Yucca Mountain facility. First, a past Department of Energy environmental assessment was done for 120,000 metric tons. And a report issued by the Electric Power Research Institute found that Yucca Mountain could hold as much as 628,000 tons of used nuclear fuel.

The proposed Yucca Mountain waste facility in Nevada needs to store more waste than current limits allow.

SOURCE: AP



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Even if capacity is increased, there may still be problems for the Yucca Mountain Project.

A March 2006 U.S. Government Accountability Office report found fault with the quality-assurance practices of the project and called for increased management attention.

A March *New York Times* article reported that 60 percent of the work Sproat's office is doing this year involves reanalyzing data that was rejected earlier because of signs of fraud.

Sproat said that's misleading. Twenty years of scientific data is being pulled together and synthesized into the license application, which is expected to be submitted in June 2008. During this process, the staff has identified data in which references were not clear or data could not be traced back to a source. This required redoing some of the past work. As the work is redone, it gets posted on a license-support network, a Web-based information-management system that contains electronically retrievable documents required for the project's license application. All of this due-diligence work is a one-time effort.

Another issue is funding for the repository. While there is a Nuclear Waste Fund of about \$19.5 billion and growing, this money cannot be used to finance the building of the repository. The reason has to do with the funds being designated mandatory receipts while the program is discretionary. President Bush has proposed a fix to this problem by reclassifying the mandatory Nuclear Waste Fund receipts as discretionary.

That proposal has not been approved by Congress. Until then, Sproat must submit annual funding proposals and compete with all other federal budget proposals. The amount of money that has been allocated is not enough to build the repository.

In the next few months, two major milestones on the path toward licensing the facility are expected to be cleared. In November, the group intends to have the design for license application completed, and in December, the project's licensing support network will be certified, Sproat said.

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