

NUCLEAR ARMS AND PROLIFERATION EDITORIAL FEBRUARY 8, 1999 ISSUE

Block ‘Mobile Chernobyl’

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By Karen Charman

JANUARY 21, 1999

If the nuclear industry gets its way, thousands of tons of deadly radioactive waste will roll onto public roads and rail lines, bound for a geologically unstable storage site in the Nevada desert—at taxpayers’ expense. Besides the huge monetary cost, this plan poses enormous risks to public health. Unless the public puts a stop to it, we will be unnecessarily subjected to the largest nuclear waste transportation program in history.

Nuclear reactors create electricity using a very dirty technology—fission—which increases the radioactivity of the uranium fuel in the reactor’s core a millionfold. Nuclear power plants weren’t designed to house all their waste, and now their cooling pools are filling up with radioactive spent fuel. Instead of looking for ways to isolate this lethal material, the nuclear industry is pushing hard for a cheap

quick fix that dumps the problem on us and future generations. Between January 1995 and June 1997, it pumped \$12.8 million in campaign contributions into Congress. Both houses passed the Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1997—known to opponents as Mobile Chernobyl. Congress adjourned before finalizing the legislation. The new House has come up with a new version and wants to ram it through as fast as possible.

If Mobile Chernobyl becomes law, shipments from the nation's 118 nuclear reactors and its handful of nuclear weapons facilities would begin in 2003. By truck, the toxic trash would travel in traffic down main roads through or around most major cities in forty-three states. By train, the hot cargo would ride with ordinary cargo. Fifty million people live within a half-mile of the proposed routes. If you live in St. Louis, for example, one shipment will come through every eight hours on average for thirty years.

ADVERTISING



Transporting radioactive waste exposes people on the roads and along the rails. Mary Olson, a nuclear waste specialist with the Nuclear Information and Resource Service in

Washington, DC, says the passengers of a car traveling next to a truck carrying the toxic trash would receive radiation equivalent to one chest X-ray an hour. That poses particular risks to pregnant women, children, the elderly and people with compromised immune systems.

It could also expose people to deadly radiation in the case of an accident. A report from the Nevada Agency for Nuclear Projects says it would take less than three minutes for an adult standing three feet from an unshielded ten-year-old fuel assembly to receive a lethal dose of radiation.

Transportation Department data tell us that nearly 100,000 accidents released toxic material in the United States and its territories between 1987 and 1997. Based on that data, and factoring in the number of shipments needed to move 3,000 tons of nuclear waste per year, as Mobile Chernobyl requires, Ralph Nader's Public Citizen estimates that there will be 210 to 354 accidents over the duration of the program.

The nuclear industry and the Energy Department insist that transporting nuclear waste is safe. But the actual casks holding the glowing garbage are not tested, and current regulations don't consider all plausible accident scenarios. By the DOE's calculations a realistic, but not even worst-case, scenario that includes a high-speed crash and fire emitting a relatively small amount of radiation in a rural area would contaminate forty-two square miles and take 462 days to clean up at a cost of \$620 million. Marvin Resnikoff, a nuclear physicist who advises the states of Nevada and Utah, says it could rise to \$19.4 billion, depending on the extent of the cleanup and how populated the area is. George Burke, a spokesman for the International Association of Firefighters—whose members would be first to respond to a nuclear road

or rail accident—says there is no nationally coordinated emergency response strategy. The task would be left to local fire departments, most of which, he says, are “woefully unprepared.”

The destination for the radioactive material is a temporary storage depot at the Nevada Test Site, next to the proposed permanent underground dump site at Yucca Mountain. Yucca Mountain sits on thirty-five earthquake faults, and between 1976 and 1996 more than 600 earthquakes greater than 2.5 on the Richter scale have occurred within a 50-mile radius. Because the mountain has recently been found to be much leakier than anyone had thought, more than 200 environmental organizations recently demanded that the DOE disqualify the site. Although pressure to approve Yucca Mountain is intense, the geological instability may yet bury that plan. If so, casks shipped there may have to be reshipped elsewhere.

How did we get into this mess? In the fifties, the government pledged that the public would pick up the tab for disposing of the waste. In 1982 a nuclear waste disposal fund was set up with money from ratepayers, but according to a study commissioned last year by the Nevada Agency for Nuclear Projects, the fund will cover only half the estimated \$54 billion it will take to dispose of the nation’s growing mountain of nuclear waste. Taxpayers are expected to fork over the rest. The Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982, which created the fund, set a January 1998 deadline for the DOE to start picking up the waste. In 1995, when the DOE officially stated it would not be ready to accept the waste, the nuclear industry and about thirty-five public utility commissions responded with lawsuits demanding compensation for their

inconvenience. So far the courts have sided with the nuclear industry, even though the DOE has no place to put the waste. Damages—which the nuclear industry says could cost the public up to \$100 billion—have yet to be decided.

Without consent or knowledge, the citizens and future generations of this country have been shafted by the Faustian bargain the government made with the nuclear industry. If all our nuclear reactors run until the end of their licenses, we will have 85,000 metric tons of high-level nuclear waste to babysit, essentially forever. Nuclear power provides about 20 percent of US electricity. In addition to shutting down all nuclear power plants as quickly as possible, we must insure that public health and safety, not special interest politics, drive future decisions dealing with the deadly radioactive heap we already have.

Our most immediate task, however, is to put the brakes on Mobile Chernobyl.

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