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Prairie Island seeks nuclear waste disposal

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WELCH, Minn. — The Prairie Island Sioux Community continues its search for a location to dump nuclear waste that sits in dry casks just yards from the community.

Since 1994, when the casks

were first placed on a dock at the Prairie Island Nuclear Generating Plant (then owned by Northern States Power Co.), the community has objected, gone to court and eventually worked out compromises with the state Legislature and NSP. Yet the dry casks remain, unwelcome

and a threat to thousands of lives.

The Prairie Island tribal council has visited the Yucca Mountain facility before, but recently revisited it for the second time in four years to see what progress has been made. The on-again, off-again site that is under construction to house all of the nation's nuclear waste will take more years to complete than the Prairie Island people anticipated. Tribal council members told Indian Country Today that the facility may not be complete until 2025. (The site was originally slated for completion in 2010; later, 2015.)

The site's opening has been delayed because of federal budget cuts and litigation over environmental issues. The Yucca Mountain site is also strongly opposed by some Western Shoshone who call it a human rights violation and have appealed to the United Nations for intervention.

The Prairie Island Sioux Community will continue to fight to remove the nuclear waste, even through numerous setbacks, said Victoria Winfrey, tribal vice president.

"Native land could be permanently marred by the nation's

failed waste policy," she said.

Each year, as fiscal year budgets emerge and are finalized, the Yucca Mountain project receives fewer dollars than the year before, thereby delaying the project.

"Each year, the fund is less and less and less. It's partly the fault of Congress and ... some ridiculous standards," said Ron Johnson, assistant tribal secretary/treasurer.

The state of Nevada successfully lobbied and received a change in the length of safe storage from 10,000 years to 1 million years. The 21 dry casks that now sit on the dock at Prairie Island are supposed to be safe for 10,000 years.

"A one-million-year radiation standard on the mountain seems ridiculous when casks yards away from our community do not have the same standards.

"The standards are clearly being imposed to kill the project," Johnson said.

The community now receives the support from Red Wing, a nearby Minnesota community that would be affected should a



PHOTO COURTESY PRAIRIE ISLAND SIOUX COMMUNITY

A mere 600 yards separate the Prairie Island Sioux Community (upper left) Xcel Energy's nuclear power plant (lower right), where dry casks containing nuclear waste sit on a dock. Community members hope the controversial Yucca Mountain facility will soon open so the waste can be stored there, even as other Native groups struggle to prevent it.

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meltdown or other disaster occur. The power plant and both communities are located on the Mississippi River, 30 miles southeast of the Twin Cities. The Mississippi is subject to flooding from time to time, thereby presenting another risk, the council members said.

While Congress and the administration promote more nuclear power as clean energy, the budget for Yucca Mountain is inadequate and can't help Prairie Island or other communities with the same issue. While discussions take place, the Prairie Island power plant and its residue sit within 600 yards of the tribal community, where health risks are now emerging.

"We know there are health risks; we don't know how they tie in or correlate. A lot of tribal members have different types of cancers," said Audrey Bennett, tribal president.

Currently, a health study by the University of Minnesota is under way and the Mayo Clinic has a health clinic in the community that is also collecting data.

"We see cancer in people who grew up with the plant ... What does that say for another 10 or 20 years?" Bennett said.

Yucca Mountain won't be able to store nuclear waste any time soon. There are no completed tunnels or alcoves that could store the waste; alcoves under the mountain are still being tested.

Johnson said what the group saw in their visit was promising. One-third of the construction is complete; and from what the scientists and geologists told the Prairie Island group, Yucca Mountain will make a safe, long-term repository for nuclear waste,

the council members said.

"We would like to strongly encourage congressional leaders to get up and going on funding support for this project," Johnson said.

"It is important this facility is opened. We spend our money to fight for these efforts. Who is going to wake up on the federal level and help us? Hey, we are spending our resources; it's time our constituency stepped up for tribes and gets going," he said.

In the meantime, the reminder of nuclear waste faces the Prairie Island community every day, as the dry-cask storage is above ground.

"Here [Yucca Mountain], it's out in a remote area; you can't see anything. We don't know how much longer the casks will be [at Prairie Island]," Vickie said.

A possible nuclear waste repository site at the Skull Valley Goshute Reservation in Utah, which also faced strong opposition by a tribal faction, has been licensed. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission on Feb. 21 licensed the potentially largest privately owned nuclear waste dump. But it is all above-ground, and the storage capacity will be 40,000 metric tons of spent nuclear rods to be held for a period not to exceed 40 years.

This would be an economic boon to the Goshutes, but Prairie Island council members are still worried about the time line: it will take 10 years for that site to be functional, they said.

The Prairie Island community has been living with the problem for a long time. The first reactor went online in 1973 and the second in 1974.

Construction began on the facility in 1969, but the Prairie Island community didn't realize it would use nuclear power.

"We didn't have a choice. It happened rather quickly and we had to live with it," Winfrey said.

The land was originally privately owned farmland. A couple of locations along the Mississippi were chosen, but communities fought the proposals and the location settled on was Prairie Island, officials said.

The tribe was poor at the time and could not properly fight the proposed power plant.

The Prairie Island community has worked out an agreement with Xcel Energy Inc., the power company that grew from NSP, for compensation of \$1 million per year for the power plant and \$400,000 per year for as long as the dry casks are stored on the site.

Another of the tribal community's concerns is terrorism. The dry casks are stored in the open and at any time, as Johnson described it, someone in a plane could hit the casks and the reactors. Millions of people live in the Twin Cities area and could be affected by the results of such an attack.

Another consideration is access to the island. There is only one road, which is blocked many times a day by trains passing on a rail line that crosses it. There could be 10,000 people on the island, at the casino or attending other events, and all employees at the plant must use the same road. Evacuation would be very difficult.

"That's a pretty scary proposition," Johnson said.

"We are frustrated but we never give up. We started as a tribe with nothing, went through [the] hard knocks of life, and now there is a health concern. We are also fighting for communities in a 50-mile radius," Johnson said.