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**Nuclear reactors in
Minnesota and Wisconsin**



Living next to radioactive waste

Prairie Island leaders want it sent to Yucca Mountain

BY MIKE LONGAECKER
Staff Writer

Nuclear waste exists all over the country and, for now, it's not going anywhere.

That reality is recognized almost universally by lawmakers, scientists and regular citizens as a problem. Compounding that problem is the fact that virtually no one wants to live near nuclear waste.

Yet many people — including Red Wing and Diamond Bluff residents —

The desire to banish the waste has resulted in plans to dump it in a massive, remote repository. Those plans have evolved into a project that would take at least 77,000 metric tons' worth of the nation's most dangerous nuclear waste to a desert mountain range in Nevada called Yucca Mountain.

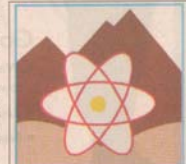
Few groups know more about living with the waste than the Prairie Island Indian Community. Its residents live near 20 dry storage casks — units that contain radioactive waste generated at the nearby Xcel

Prairie Island nuclear facility — which sit about 600 yards away from reservation land.

Leaders there say the waste represents a threat not just to their community, but to visitors of the island and surrounding areas.

As such, tribal leaders know their situation won't be resolved by sitting on their hands, a spokesman said.

"They're doing anything they can to make sure the waste gets out of Minnesota and off Prairie Island," Tribal spokesman Jake Reint said.



The third in a four-part series

In February, Reint and Tribal Council members accompanied members of the Legislative Electrical Energy Task Force and Red Wing City Council on a tour

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of the Yucca Mountain project.

Nuclear neighbors

The tour was Tribal Council Vice President Vicky Winfrey's first to the site, but the experience convinced her the project deserves the go-ahead.

"I believe that could be a permanent place for the storage," she said.

The tribe's experience with nuclear energy dates back more than 30 years, when Xcel Energy (then Northern States Power) broke ground for the nuclear plant. Assurances were made that when the plant's spent fuel rods needed to be disposed of, they'd eventually go to a national repository.

By the late 1980s, there was waste — but no repository. Spent fuel had to be stored somewhere. That somewhere ended up being Prairie Island after an appellate court ruled that the Legislature had to grant permission for the casks to remain on site. The Legislature in 1994 approved a law allowing NSP to store up to 17 dry casks on site.

"They fought hard in 1994 to get an agreement," Winfrey said of tribal efforts to remove the waste. "But they had to go on fighting."

A done deal

In 2002, the fight ended with an agreement between the utility company and the tribe.

Tribal Council agreed to terms with Xcel that keeps the waste on site until an alternative site — Yucca Mountain is the only permanent site being considered by the feds — is built. The deal was reached "in the spirit of cooperation," Reint said.

Included in the deal is almost \$1.5 million a year in funds for the tribe as long as the plant operates and the casks remain, he said.

Winfrey and Reint said additional funding is being sought for measures to increase security around the reservation. The tribe is working with the Department of Homeland Security to develop emergency planning and to acquire emergency equipment, Reint noted.

Safety concerns

Seeking stepped-up security is something Winfrey said is a must in light of the



Reint



Winfrey

terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. She said tribal members are becoming more vigilant in safeguarding their land as a result.

"Everybody's looking out to see what strangers are around, who's visiting," she said. "They're more aware of the vulnerability, being near the casks. If this could be a target, it could affect a lot of people."

But to many in the tribe, funds don't equal protection, Winfrey said.

"A lot of people don't think any amount of money is worth having to live near the casks, the nuclear plant or the danger," said Winfrey, who voted in favor of the agreement.

Thus the tribe's push to get the casks off the island and in a permanent repository. Winfrey said she felt comfortable with Yucca Mountain, calling it "a logical place" to store the waste.

Reint agreed.

"It's as good a site as any — and probably better than any," he said.

Nevada backlash

But if the tribe is to get its way one day — Winfrey added that the tribe will seek a new location if a permanent site doesn't materialize — it can count on stiff competition from the state of Nevada. Politicians there, including Gov. Kenny Guinn, fiercely oppose the project, and have vowed to stop at nothing to end it.

Opponents in Nevada point to a number of possible threats, including radiation contamination of the water table, which lies about 2,000 feet beneath the mountain. Testing and data analysis continues at the site on a number of fronts, including heat analysis, geologic testing and water migration.

Other concerns include the capacity of the mountain. U.S. Department of Energy figures state there are currently 50,000 metric tons of waste in the country. Opponents claim that if the project is approved by 2012,

Tribe backs new federal legislation

BY MIKE LONGAECKER
Staff Writer

As of late February, the Yucca Mountain project was in a "tremendous state of flux," project spokesman John Hartley said. But depending on the outcome of Bush administration legislation unveiled on Wednesday, that instability could turn into momentum for the project.

Behind the push are Prairie Island leaders and representatives.

At a presentation last week in Washington, D.C., Tribal spokesman Jake Reint made the rounds on Capitol Hill urging lawmakers to support Yucca Mountain.

"Leaving spent fuel at places like Prairie Island indefinitely cannot be an option," he told members of a national bipartisan coalition looking to build support for the proposal.

The proposal would withdraw permanently from public use the land at and around the Yucca

Mountain repository site in Nevada and would open up Congress' ability to provide funding for the project, according to a statement from the U.S. Department of Energy.

"This proposed legislation will help provide stability, clarity and predictability to the Yucca Mountain project and will help lay a solid foundation for America's energy security," Secretary of Energy Samuel Bodman said.

Also included in the proposal are measures to eliminate the current 70,000 metric-ton capacity at the site and a "more streamlined" Nuclear Regulatory Commission licensing process. Other provisions include initiation for infrastructure activities — including safety and other upgrades — and rail line construction to enable earlier start-up of operations.

Reint noted that while the proposal didn't address temporary storage — something the tribe supported — it still represents progress.

"It looks like it's in line with what the tribe has been supporting," he said.

existing waste will push the mountain's expected 77,000 metric-ton capacity.

"It's almost full the day it's open," Nevada Attorney General George Chanos said.

Under a recent Bush administration proposal, the mountain's 77,000-ton cap would be lifted.

An estimated \$18 billion — mostly gleaned from utility ratepayers — have gone into the project, with another \$12 billion remaining before it could open, said project spokesman John Hartley. The project's life-cycle is expected to total about \$60 billion, he said, adding that about 10 percent of funding would come from taxpayer funds.

Seismic considerations

Nevada's Citizen Alert is among several groups leading the charge against creation of the repository. The group says the mountain contains intrinsic problems.

Noting that the mountain is in a volcanic area, Citizen Alert claims an eruption could cause catastrophic release of radioactivity. The possibility of seismic activity exists, said Hartley, though he said it's extremely unlikely.

"Because Nevada is an active seismic state does not mean that there can't be stable areas within it," Hartley, of Bechtel SAIC Co., said of Yucca Mountain's 12-mile system of ridges and valleys.

He added that research indicates the risk of volcanic activity in the area is about

one in 65 million.

Steve Frischman, technical policy coordinator for the Nevada governor's office Agency for Nuclear Projects, disagreed.

"This is not an island of stability," Frischman told Tribal and City Council members, adding that in 1992 a 5.2-level earthquake shook nearby Death Valley.

Frischman and Hartley — both engineers — go round and round on issues, rarely agreeing, often offering seemingly contradictory information. That made things confusing, Red Wing City Council member Dean Hove said — until Frischman said something Hove believed tipped the balance.

Hove said he asked Frischman for an alternative solution to Yucca Mountain. Hove said Frischman indicated that since Minnesotans appeared better able to organize than Nevadans, they'd have a greater chance of defeating the project.

"That kind of swayed me on that," said Hove, who attended the trip to Yucca Mountain with fellow council members Stephen Castner, Gary Nordmark and Mike Hall.

However, some in Red Wing aren't sold on the Yucca Mountain project. Attorney Carol Overland — she represented Florence Township in the 1990s during efforts to store spent fuel there — doesn't see a future in the project for several of the same reasons many Nevadans oppose it.

The only feasible option,

Overland said, is to leave the casks where they are for now and work aggressively toward solving the problem cooperatively.

"We have to find a workable, equitable and moral agreement between Xcel and state and federal governments," she said, "and Prairie Island first and foremost because it is the heart of their community."

Alternatives ahead?

Hove said he believed the trip — his first to the site — convinced him that Yucca Mountain should be the eventual resting place for nuclear waste.

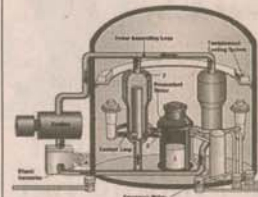
According to a DOE release, nuclear waste is currently stored above ground at more than 100 sites in 39 states.

"I'd rather see it in one spot than dotted all over the country," Hove said.

Hove and fellow City Council member Gary Nordmark speculated that reprocessing of nuclear waste should be explored in the near future to limit amounts to be disposed of. Nordmark said he's confident Yucca Mountain will be a safe place to store the waste and said radiological contamination concerns are "silly" since technology will likely outpace the government's 10,000-year shelf life for the repository.

"I think we'll be reprocessing long before that," he said.

Not everyone along for the trip was quite as optimistic. Scott Dibble, DFL-Minneapolis, said the visit raised more questions than



How it works

Xcel Energy's two nuclear reactors at Prairie Island are pressurized water reactors. In a typical commercial pressurized light-water reactor (1) the reactor core generates heat, (2) pressurized water in the primary coolant loop carries the heat to the steam generator, (3) inside the steam generator heat from the primary coolant loop vaporizes the water in a secondary loop producing steam, (4) the steam line directs the steam to the main turbine causing it to turn the turbine generator, which produces electricity. The unused steam is exhausted to the condenser where it is condensed into water. The resulting water is pumped out of the condenser with a series of pumps, reheated, and pumped back to the steam generator. The reactor core contains fuel assemblies which are cooled by water, which is force-circulated by electrically powered pumps. Emergency cooling water is supplied by other pumps, which can be powered by on site diesel generators. Other safety systems, such as the containment cooling system, also need power. — image and information from the U.S. Department of Energy

it answered.

Dibble, an opponent of nuclear energy, said he was concerned that issues like deep underwater-boring technology seemed to be dismissed by Hartley.

"I felt like we got the brush-off," Dibble said. "I'm looking for way better answers."

Same goes for Overland. That responsibility rests with the utility companies, the feds and state governments, she said.

"I don't have the answer, and it's not reasonable to expect that I have it," she said. "Give me the resources Xcel has and I'll work on it."

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