

2 of 2 DOCUMENTS

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## Company wants to study nuclear waste disposal in Pecos County

**BYLINE:** Corey Paul, Odessa American, Texas**SECTION:** STATE AND REGIONAL NEWS**LENGTH:** 700 words

Dec. 21--A company hoping to win a drilling project in Pecos County to study high-level nuclear waste storage will launch a months-long public relations campaign in hopes of winning community support for a research site.

No nuclear waste would be stored in the test, which would also be used to research geothermal energy production.

But a successful test in the Fort Stockton area could prompt the federal government and private companies to consider the Trans-Pecos for permanently storing canisters of high-level nuclear waste underground.

Local approval would be key before the Department of Energy would allow the company, AECOM, to drill the so-called deep borehole field test into a solid rock formation more than three miles beneath the surface. The Department of Energy scrapped a similar project in North and South Dakota earlier this year amid local opposition.

AECOM, a multinational engineering firm, is competing against companies in two New Mexico sites and one South Dakota site to win approval to drill the borehole. The DOE announced the four companies selected to explore a test site on Monday.

The proposed site in Fort Stockton is on University Lands. The University of Texas' **Bureau of Economic Geology** would perform research on the site, and the driller would be Corpus Christi-based Orion Drilling Company.

The DOE estimated the research project could take up to five years to conduct and cost \$20 million to \$40 million.

"This is only a research test," said Chuck McDonald, a consultant hired by AECOM to work on the P.R. effort. "There is no nuclear waste involved. Is it possible that after five years the test determined that this could be done and somebody could come back and say 'Let's propose a disposal facility?' Yes, that could happen. But just the mere fact that there is a research test being done in no way triggers that."

McDonald said officials are planning a series of public meetings that will begin as soon as January. They will also open an office in Fort Stockton as they seek approval for the research project from various local governmental agencies.

This first phase of community outreach, along with some geological analysis, will last through about May. But the P.R. campaign could last several more months before the DOE picks a site later in 2017.

The test borehole would be drilled about 16,400 feet into the crystalline basement rock formation near Fort Stockton, deeper than most oil wells. Canisters would be placed in the bottom 2,000 meters of the borehole, while the upper portion of the borehole would be sealed.

Researchers would study areas such as drilling techniques, wellbore stability, sealing and properties of the subsurface with a goal of determining whether deep boreholes in the area could serve as safe disposal sites for nuclear waste the DOE stores at plants around the country, State Geologist and Bureau Director Scott Tinker said in a statement.

Researchers would also explore potential for developing geothermal energy.

Supporters of the research project signaled they would tout economic and scientific benefits the test could offer the area.

After scrapping the North and South Dakota deep borehole project, the DOE restarted the project and required public support and outreach that makes clear the field test site will not be used for future nuclear waste disposal, the DOE's Undersecretary for Science and Energy Franklin Orr said in a statement.

Orr said the test project is part of the DOE's effort to find a "safe and practical alternative" for storing smaller forms of nuclear waste to mined geological repositories, such as the stalled Yucca Mountain permanent disposal site in Nevada.

Orr said that "anytime a community hears about a federal government project involving the words 'nuclear waste,' questions and concerns understandably arise," but that "only those teams that establish an agreement with the local community will go forward in the competition for the final site selection."

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