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High-level radioactivity at Andrews?

Leaders review Nuclear Regulatory Commission plan

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Posted: Sunday, August 9, 2020 5:30 am

By Bob Campbell bcampbell@oaoa.com



Posted on Aug 9, 2020
by Bob Campbell

ANDREWS The proposed installation of a high-level nuclear waste repository alongside the low-level plant 30 miles

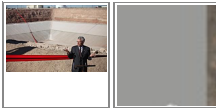
west of here is prompting criticism, support and caution from officials including Congressman Mike Conaway,





Heather Leiphart | Odessa American

Then State Rep. Tryon Lewis is shown the low-level nuclear waste repository west of Andrews in 2011. The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission proposes to install a high-level facility adjacent to the low-level one.



oppose any increase in the amount or concentration of radioactivity authorized for disposal at the facility in Andrews County.

"Texas is ready to work cooperatively with our federal partners to safely manage the use and disposal of radioactive materials. In the spirit of that relationship, please consider measures to allow for state approval of any changes you would propose."

However, Conaway said through a Washington spokeswoman Aug. 4 that he supports the plan because the citizens of Andrews do. "The community of Andrews strongly supports the project and is already home to a licensed, established waste facility with a proven track record of safety," the Midland Republican said.

"If the Nuclear Regulatory Commission approves this additional site, I am confident that it will also serve as a safe and secure solution for waste disposal."

The NRC held public hearings on the plan in Hobbs, N.M., and Andrews Feb. 17 and 19 and will take public comments through Nov. 3 at WCS_CISF_EIS@nrc.gov or the Office of Administration, Mail Stop TWFN-7-A60M, Attention Program Management, Announcements and Editing Staff, U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission,

State Sen. Kel Seliger and State Rep. Brooks Landgraf.

In a joint venture, Waste Control Specialists of Dallas and Orano USA, a subsidiary of the French company Orano, have formed the Andrews-based Interim Storage Partners Inc. and applied to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission to start taking radioactive fuel rods with a half-life of 24,000 years from nuclear power plants.

The WCS facility is on 1,338 acres and the companies own 14,900 acres on which to expand near Eunice, N.M. The NRC expects to come to a decision by May 2021.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott wrote to the NRC and U.S. Energy Department in April last year, saying in part, "Actions taken by the DOE and NRC could allow for the disposal of more highly radioactive waste in Texas without approval by our state.

"The federal government should allow states with disposal sites for low-level radioactive waste to accept or reject such changes rather than forcing them to take on increased hazards," Abbott said. "At this time, I

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Washington, D.C. 20555-0001.

Andrews City Manager Steve Eggleston said there was a good deal of criticism of the 40-year proposal at the February hearing but that Mayor Flora Braly and County Judge Charlie Falcon remain supportive. "There was a lot of opposition from non-Andrews people and from new people in town who were strongly vocal because they were worried about what would happen to their kids," Eggleston said.

"It's a matter of getting out and educating the community again because there is more opposition now than there was five or 10 years ago."

Eggleston said Braly and Falcon are determined to do what their constituents want and will fight the project if the majority tips the other way.

Noting that the repository's staff has numbered between 100 and 200 people and that it is one of the county's top 10 employers, he said the plant has an excellent safety record and that ISP Vice President Elicia Sanchez is giving tours to build support. "The mayor and judge are strongly backing the company," Eggleston said.

ISP spokeswoman Karen Johnson of Austin said the ISP and WCS operations will remain separate if the plan goes forward. "The U.S. nuclear energy industry is one of the most highly regulated industries in the world and one with the strongest safety culture among its many private company providers," Johnson said.

"A direct result of this safety focus is more than 50 years of storing, transporting and dry storage of used nuclear fuel by private companies without a single incident causing harm to people or the environment. Additionally, the proposed site is a uniquely well-suited location adjacent to the current WCS facility with its robust geology, experienced work force and stellar 20-year-plus safety record."

Johnson said there have been no cases of cancer attributable to WCS operations. "Doses to workers are all well below Texas and federal regulatory limits," she said.

Democratic congressional nominee Jon Mark Hogg of San Angelo said Congress will have to approve the permit if the NRC grants a license to store up to 45,000 metric tons of spent nuclear waste because current law does not allow it.

Referring to the Nevada site that was closed by the Obama administration in 2009, Hogg said, "The plan is for surface storage out in the West Texas sun, not deep underground storage as had been the plan at Yucca Mountain.

"Professionals in the industry recommend against locating highly radioactive nuclear waste in the vicinity of valuable mineral resources like oil and gas. This appears to be a classic case of foreign companies, outsiders and wealthy corporations planning to make billions off the taxpayers' Nuclear Waste Disposal Fund while a small rural



Today's Edition

area that does not have the political clout to stop them bears the consequences.”

Seliger said he “will do the best I can to represent the people of Andrews County, but I think an awful lot of examination needs to be done before high level waste goes in there.

“The feasibility of it is being studied by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and the State Bureau of Economic Geology,” the Amarillo Republican said. “The decision needs to be made very carefully with public input and acceptance and I think we are a long way from there.”

Asked if he was concerned that a private company would manage the repository, Seliger said, “No, Pantex has been manufacturing and storing nuclear weapons near Amarillo for decades.

“It’s not a safe situation with spent fuel rods being stored at electrical plants like Comanche Peak near Fort Worth and the South Texas Nuclear Generating Station near Victoria. This kind of thing can be done safely, but we have to be sure it’s done safely way out into the future.”

Seliger noted that the DOE’s Waste Isolation Plant east of Carlsbad, N.M., stores defense-oriented transuranic, or very radioactive waste, in a salt formation 2,150 feet underground.

Landgraf said he will determine how much backing the plan has by visiting Andrews and talking to people, not just the influential citizens and elected officials but also “the hard-working everyday people. In the discussions I have had, they were very supportive of low-level storage,” the Odessa Republican said.

“It’s different for high-level storage. The project has not been authorized at this point and there are quite a few people who don’t feel they have enough information to make a decision. I will support whatever decision they make as a community.”

Calling for a calm, well-reasoned process, Landgraf said, “It’s a sensitive issue.

“The worst thing that can happen is fear-mongering or a whitewash. We need to let the voices of the people who will be most affected be heard and not be drowned out by anybody else. The public deserves to know all the facts and to be able to make an informed decision without any sort of exaggeration or misinformation.”

Bob Campbell is a reporter for the Odessa American covering Religion and Lifestyle in the Permian Basin.





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Posted in Local News, State on *Sunday, August 9, 2020 5:30 am.* | Tags: Kel Seliger, Brooks Landgraf, Andrews, Radioactive Waste, Congress, Mike Conaway, U.s. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Greg Abbott, Radioactivity, Fuel Rods







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