



## **Blue Ribbon Commission: Disposing of our nuclear waste**

By Andrew Holland, senior fellow, American Security Project - 02/03/12 12:12 PM ET

Last week, the Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Nuclear Future (BRC) released its final report to the Secretary of Energy detailing how the country should dispose of its nuclear waste. This week, the co-chairs, former Congressman Lee Hamilton and former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft made the rounds to both the Senate and House for hearings on the issue.

This commission was tasked by President Obama in January 2010 with conducting a comprehensive review of America's nuclear waste problem. The reason for creating this commission was that President had just fulfilled a campaign promise to close the Yucca Mountain Waste Repository in Nevada. But, closing Yucca Mountain would not address the problem of what to do with America's nuclear waste.

So, in a time honored Washington tradition for dealing with an intractable problem, the President outsourced finding a solution to a commission. Some will say that just by creating this commission, the President was trying to kick the can down the road, and then bury the report in a drawer. But, the participants in the committee were important; including prominent nuclear scientists, leaders of advocacy groups, and some of Washington's most distinguished senior retired policymakers, like Co-Chairmen Hamilton and Scowcroft or retired Senators Chuck Hagel and Pete Domenici. The stature of this group ensures that this commission will get the respect it deserves.

Even more importantly, this is a problem that isn't going away. To the contrary, as the report says, the failure to deal with the problem of nuclear waste "has already proved damaging and costly, and it will only be more damaging and more costly the longer it continues." There is over 65,000 metric tons of spent fuel here in the U.S. that needs to be permanently disposed of.

The commission released a list of 8 specific recommendations, ranging from working more closely with communities hosting nuclear waste to promptly initiating efforts to plan, site, and build both a permanent geologic disposal facility and a temporary central storage facility. The entire list provides a roadmap for how to constructively move forward on this issue. It is a balanced approach that deserves timely consideration from Congress and the administration.

The most important recommendations surround how to store the waste, both temporarily and

permanently. The report notes that, even if Yucca Mountain were opened, the current, and growing, volume of spent nuclear fuel in the U.S. means that it would quickly be filled, and a new permanent repository would have to be built anyway. Even though the process could take twenty years, it is important to begin as soon as possible.

Even though most of the questions from members of Congress were clearly posturing on the status of Yucca Mountain, the commission's mandate specifically notes that this was not a siting commission, so they have no say on the future of Yucca Mountain or the efficacy of other sites.

The government has a legal requirement to provide a permanent repository for spent nuclear waste. Until this requirement is met, it is very difficult to foresee much further growth in nuclear power here. There is very little interest in financing the building of any new nuclear reactors at all. A big part of that reluctance is based on the uncertainty surrounding the long term handling of the waste.

The release of the BRC's report is a first step towards resolving that problem. However, it is just a reset back to the point where the country was 30 years ago when Congress was first considering the issue. That time, the process was short-circuited by a decision to move ahead with Yucca Mountain, without considering other possible sites. This time, lawmakers must allow the process for siting a new permanent waste repository to move ahead at its own speed. There are few things that would inspire a NIMBY (Not in my backyard) response quicker than a proposal to build a nuclear waste dump. But, the report shows instead that there are communities who will be willing to host such a facility, given the right mixture of incentives and reassurances.

If the United States can solve this puzzle, then we can provide a model for other countries around the world: as the report states, about 60 new reactors are currently under construction, and more than 60 countries that do not currently host nuclear power have expressed interest in them. The U.S. has a clear interest in making sure that our nuclear fuel cycle for these plants are secure, and an even more potent interest that the rest of the world has a model for how to deal with their waste.

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