

INQUIRING MINDS WANT TO KNOW--ABOUT YUCCA MOUNTAIN

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a review of the Yucca Mountain Project's public affairs activities during the past year. The selection of Yucca Mountain as the first site to be characterized as a potential high-level nuclear waste repository has generated additional public interest in an already controversial program. To meet this increased level of concern by Nevada residents and media, the Project Office has stepped up its public affairs program. In addition to presentations in response to invitations by business, civic and service groups, an information office, exhibit showings and other standard public information activities, this effort includes a new direction in planning major Project Update meetings. This approach focuses on what the public wants to know, rather than on how scientists and engineers describe their work. Agendas are structured around informal discussions with Nevada residents in different parts of the state. The State of Nevada is invited to share the podium. Controversial issues are addressed head-on, and maximum time is allotted for audience participation. While many meeting attendees certainly do not support the repository program, the leader of the major "grass roots" organization which opposes the project has told other Federal agencies that all public meetings should be conducted like this. As site characterization activities get underway, it is anticipated that these opportunities for true interaction between the project and the public will expand.

DISCUSSION

When people talk about the Yucca Mountain High-Level Waste Repository Project, they do it in Herculean terms: bigger than the Pyramids. The largest engineering project in the world. First-of-a-kind facility. This unique project also presents one of the world's biggest challenges in another way: dealing with the public. The task of providing genuine opportunities for the public to become informed about Yucca Mountain and the scientific work going on there is large indeed. Please remember that we're talking about helping people become informed and educated, NOT about generating advocates for the repository program. Let me emphasize this point. We're not in business to produce and push nuclear waste propaganda on a skeptical public. We help support efforts by the Department of Energy's Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management in Washington, D.C., and the Yucca Mountain Project Office in Las Vegas to provide information to people about how the program got to this point, what's going on now, where it's headed next, and how they can be involved.

As I noted, this is a tall order. First, the subject of nuclear waste has a couple of strikes against it to begin with. Nuclear physics is not an easy subject to understand and it's hard to explain in simple language. Second, Nevadans are skeptical about the Federal Government in general and DOE in particular. This is the state that brought the West the Sagebrush Rebellion to reclaim federally-controlled land. It fought the Air Force's proposal to base MX missiles in desert racetracks. It had no speed limit on rural highways before the federally mandated 55 mile-an-hour limit. Nevadans are a strong, tough, smart, independent bunch of people who love their state and want to protect it. I know, because both my associate and I first moved there more than a decade ago, and these traits haven't changed a bit since then. Today, Nevadans are concerned about the waste program, and their inquiring minds want to know what a repository could mean to them and how it could affect their lives.

Congress recognized this when the Nuclear Waste Policy and Amendments Acts were written. So provisions in the law and a desire to work with our fellow Nevadans

presents DOE and its contractors the task of informing people about an emotional, highly complex technical issue which is the subject of a lot of misinformation. And our jobs entail doing it accurately, expeditiously, and within budget. So, where does one begin? We found it best to go back to the public information basics, and do nuts-and-bolts-types of activities and products. In the past two years, a multi-activity public affairs program has evolved and grown as the project has grown. The basic tenant of the Project's outreach program is "never turn down an invitation, never pass up an opportunity to speak." In addition, the Project Office has begun designing its public meetings so that the meeting becomes what the citizens want to hear instead of the meeting that the scientists want to give. The results have been encouraging. Allow me to illustrate.

In 1988, the Yucca Mountain Project Office made more than sixty presentations to State and local government officials, service clubs, civic organizations, professional societies, business groups and the like. And this number doesn't include formal briefings to other Federal agencies or internal DOE meetings. Our project representatives have spoken to major gatherings of professional engineers; the Beatty, Nevada, volunteer firemen; an oversight committee of the Nevada Legislature; and high school physics students. We've talked to middle school science students, interested businessmen, concerned environmentalists, skeptical senior citizens and just plain folks. They have one thing in common: they want to know what's going on with the Yucca Mountain Project, and they want to know how the project could affect their lives and communities.

A major force in our outreach program is Project Manager Carl Gertz. If you've met Carl, you know what I mean. He will accept any invitation at any time at any place to talk about Yucca Mountain. Our audiences have ranged from seven senior citizens, who were members of a local sorority, meeting in the club president's living room, to more than 200 members of the Las Vegas Rotary Club meeting in a casino showroom.

But just responding to invitations isn't enough. Not everyone belongs to the Beatty Chamber of Commerce or the local chapter of the American Nuclear Society. The Project has a responsibility to make information easily

accessible, not just "available." To help accomplish this, we're holding semi-annual Project Update Meetings in south, central and northern Nevada. Public information meetings in themselves are nothing new, but the Project Office has changed the traditional approach to meeting planning. Most of you know what usually happens when scientists have to put together a presentation for a public meeting. They sit down, grab their most recent collection of organization charts, engineering diagrams, topographical maps and equation calculations. Then they cram as many words as possible on viewgraphs in order to get it all in, add the two together, and voila! a public presentation. Unfortunately, the main points of the presentation generally are lost on the average lay audience. So we took a different tack. About six weeks before the update meetings, we have begun calling a number of citizens in various parts of Nevada to see what THEY want to know. These are regular people, some of whom are connected with the Project either officially or unofficially, some of whom have no connection other than as interested Nevadans. The results have been interesting. We found that people aren't attuned to the Project's timeline, and don't have a feel for how the big pieces fit together. They're concerned about socioeconomic and transportation issues insofar as these might affect their lives. The responses can vary widely depending on where people live, although respondents universally say they're pleased that DOE took the time to ask. It may not be totally scientific, but it gives us a feel for what we need to do.

We use these comments to design the public meeting to respond to what the people really want to know, rather than what the Project thinks it ought to tell them. The sessions begin with a general introduction, which is followed by topical presentations. For example, DOE's introduction to last June's update meetings asked, and then answered, questions such as "Why Nevada?", "Would the repository be safe?", and "Why should we believe what DOE says?" The topical presentations include information that responds to the issues raised in our informal telephone calls. And we're frank about what we know and what we don't know. The emphasis is on putting information in terms that can easily be understood. That means using words of less than five syllables, simple graphics, pictures, and uncluttered non-bureaucratic slides. In addition, representatives from the State of Nevada and local governments also are invited to participate in the meetings alongside DOE, and a maximum amount of time is left for audience questions and answers. In addition, there are topical displays and exhibits scattered around the meeting room, with technical staff standing by to talk to the public and discuss issues with them. The meetings are widely advertised, and persons who sign up for our mailing list receive notices of future meetings. It's a simple formula, but one that we think has been responsive to what people really want to know. We've had some positive feedback about it. Depending on availability of resources,

we're also considering holding less-formal discussion groups on specific topics on an as-requested basis in local communities.

We're doing other things, too. There's a Yucca Mountain Information Office open in Beatty seven days a week, and another one on the drawing boards for Las Vegas. Here the public is provided with information material, technical project documents, exhibits, and audiovisuals, produced both by DOE and the State of Nevada. The Beatty office also serves as a point of contact where people can get answers to questions, see employment postings, and hold information meetings. We've also been known to provide highway directions to the occasional lost tourist looking for Death Valley. An open house for the Beatty office was held last Palm Sunday, and we had more than 100 guests.

One of the most popular public activities is a site tour. Because these tours involve going onto the Nevada Test Site, visitors must sign up in advance and be scheduled through DOE's Office of External Affairs at the Nevada Operations Office. There are some age and citizenship requirements. The general Nevada Test Site tour includes a discussion of the waste-management program and distribution of Yucca Mountain Project information. Other tours specific to Yucca Mountain and Project support facilities also are available on a limited basis. Last summer, we opened our state-of-the-art facility near Yucca Mountain to house rock core and environmental samples. I understand that a group Test Site tour was offered through Waste Management 89; I hope some of you will be able to go, either this week or sometime in the future.

In addition to the things I've outlined so far, the Project sends its major technical documents and accompanying public information material to more than a dozen libraries scattered throughout Nevada. Formal public hearings are held as required on program milestone documents, with hearing times and locations widely advertised and mailing lists and the media notified. Press releases are issued as activities warrant, and the project responds to numerous media inquiries. Finally, the project also is working to involve the University of Nevada system in various research activities.

As you have seen, there are a number of ways that people can stay informed about the Yucca Mountain Project. By this point, you're sitting there thinking, "If they're doing such a great job, how come the dump is so unpopular with the State?" As I mentioned earlier, we are not proselytizing, or "selling" the project. We aren't seeking "true believers" or promoting the repository as a cure for economic ills. DOE fully recognizes that there are many unanswered questions about the suitability of the Yucca Mountain site -- that's the whole point of \$1 billion to \$2 billion worth of scientific study during the next seven years. What we're trying to do is to provide clear, factual information to the people who want and deserve it. We have found

the best way to do that is through the most fundamental communication practices, including personal contact. My staff and the Yucca Mountain Project Office people for whom we work feel a genuine responsibility to get this

information out, while building a credible basis for future interactions.