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UTAH OFFICIAL BACKS N-WASTE DUMP SITE

Chief of state radiation board says Goshutes are entitled to the project.

By Karl Cates, Staff Writer

Attempts to put the first national nuclear-reactor waste dump on an Indian reservation 40 miles southeast of Salt Lake City received a surprise endorsement Friday.

"We live in the United States of America, not the separate states of America," said Robert J. Hoffman, chairman of the Utah Radiation Control Board.

Noting the proposal is at the center of an economic development plan for the impoverished and tiny Skull Valley Band of the Goshute Indian Tribe, Hoffman said the group is entitled to the project.

"They cannot be faulted for trying to put themselves in a better economic future," said Hoffman, insisting the project would be "nonpolluting" with "very few real hazards."

The board reserved judgment on the matter, voting to hold an April 4 public hearing.

By early summer, tribal leaders will formally petition the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission for a license that would let them accept spent nuclear fuel rods from a consortium of 11 utility companies from the Midwest, the West Coast, the South and the Northeast. The operation would be lucrative, generating perhaps tens of millions of dollars a year for the small Goshute band, which has about 60 registered members.

Hoffman's stance is noteworthy because it is the first sign of favor for the project from within state government, even if questions remain about whether Utah has any say in the matter.

Proponents have argued the reservation is part of a sovereign Indian nation and therefore exempt from state regulation.

Nonetheless, Gov. Mike Leavitt's administration is formally on record as being staunchly against the proposal, promising to fight its progress.

Hoffman made his announcement during a board meeting at which Bill Sinclair, director of the Division of Radiation Control, offered members a draft resolution condemning the Goshute plan.

He said he presented the document in an attempt "to get support for the governor's position."

Among objections outlined by Sinclair:

- The Goshute site, touted as a temporary storage facility, will become "a permanent repository by default" because no other state wants such waste.
- The matter raises "a question of waste equity" created by an entrenched tradition of using Western states as a "dumping ground" for the rest of the country.
- "Utah does not have any nuclear power plants and does not generate spent fuel."

The resolution was politely received - but not embraced.

Though Hoffman's was the lone voice in clear favor of the Goshute plan, others seemed sympathetic.

"I've been a little bit concerned about the way people jump into this in an emotional way," said Teryl Hunsaker, a Tooele County commissioner who sits on the board.

"We need to let (the Skull Valley band) come in and tell us what they want to do and show us how they're going to do it."

Hunsaker noted that much of Tooele County's rural economy is dependent on a waste-disposal industry that includes a low-level radioactive garbage dump run by Envirocare of Utah, two hazardous-waste incinerators operated by Laidlaw Environmental Services, the Grassy Mountain hazardous-waste landfill and a recently begun project to burn a huge portion of the country's deadly nerve gas stockpile at the Tooele Army Depot.

Hunsaker said such efforts are "very safe, very well-monitored" and "an economic benefit to the county."

One member was vocally critical of the proposal, however.

Preston Truman, a longtime activist in the "downwinder" movement against the further nuclear contamination of Utah, said any federal policy geared toward locating a radioactive-waste repository on the Goshute reservation would be rooted in "bribery, wishful thinking and racism."

Truman predicted proponents will claim the Skull Valley band a sovereign nation beyond the pale of state policing.

"What's going to happen 40 years down the road when it turns out the thing's not temporary anymore?" asked Truman. "(They'll say) we cannot interfere in the interests of a sovereign nation."

Truman touched on the issue's turbulent history, rooted in the failure of the U.S. Department of Energy to find a permanent site for spent fuel rods from scores of nuclear power plants around the country.

The federal government has long sought to create a site at Yucca Mountain, Nev., but political opposition there has stalled the effort. Meanwhile, utility companies say they have run out of on-site storage space for spent fuel and need a final resting place for the dangerous material.

Scott Northard, the project's manager and a spokesman for Minneapolis-based Northern States Power, which serves five states, promised "a very long and open process" as the Goshutes pursue their efforts.

He noted that utilities last week sued the federal government for failing to make good so far on promises to find a permanent national repository for nuclear power-plant waste by 1998. The lawsuit asks that utility companies be relieved from their obligations to support a fund that has collected \$12 billion to date toward the construction and maintenance of a permanent site.

John Ward, a Salt Lake-based spokesman for the project, said member companies in addition to Northern States Power are Consolidated Edison of New York; Boston Edison; San Francisco-based Pacific Gas and Electric; Southern California Edison; Southern Co. of Birmingham, Ala.; Indiana-Michigan Power Co.; Dairyland Power Cooperative of Wisconsin; General Public Utilities Nuclear of Newark, N.J.; Illinois Power; and Wisconsin Electric Power.

Hoffman said "the entire economic health of the nation" is at risk unless a storage site for spent nuclear fuel is found and said even if Utah has no nuclear power plants of its own, it is tied

inextricably to states that do.

"A substantial fraction of the products we use every day - from automobiles to Zantac or whatever - are made possible because of electrical power generation."

Ward said the technology for the Goshute project is safe and feasible, though board member Norman J. Sunderland said, "The transportation issue is something that should be addressed."

Hoffman countered by saying crash tests have proven the armored casks that would be used in shipping radioactive material via rail would withstand virtually any accident.

He noted, too, that if Yucca Mountain eventually becomes the nation's main repository for such waste, a good portion of it will likely travel through Utah.

Ward dismissed claims that the Goshutes are substantially divided on the matter.

"An overwhelming majority of the band has studied the technology for five years and is now in support of the project," he said.

He added, however, that should the federal government approve the site, questions persist over whether the state can stop the project.

"That is an area that's in question," agreed Sinclair, the Radiation Control Division chief.

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