

## Sweden Picks Nuclear Waste Repository Site

BY JEFF BEATTIE

As new questions were raised in Congress about the Obama administration's nuclear waste policies, Sweden's nuclear utilities announced Wednesday they have selected the municipality of Osthrammar from among two communities willing to host an underground disposal facility for spent fuel generated by that nation's 10 reactors.

Sweden's announcement stands in marked contrast to developments in the United States, where comments by Energy Secretary Steven Chu Wednesday suggested clearly that the Energy Department is returning fully to square one in its efforts to build a national spent fuel repository.

In a hearing before the House Energy and Water Appropriations Subcommittee, Chu clearly suggested to a frustrated Rep. Mike Simpson (R-Idaho) that an advisory panel Chu is appointing to evaluate the nation's nuclear waste management options will not consider the Yucca Mountain repository project in Nevada among the options.

Shortly after taking office in January, President Barack Obama announced plans to halt development of Yucca, despite the nearly \$10 billion in taxpayer money spent on the project. Obama said the Yucca site was not safe for nuclear storage and that he would appoint a "blue-ribbon" panel to look broadly at alternatives.

Asked by Simpson if the panel will evaluate Yucca alongside other alternatives, Chu said: "Yucca Mountain as a long-term repository is definitely off the table.

"Based on what we know today...there are actually better geological sites," Chu told Simpson.

Chu has said that science has advanced over the two decades that DOE has been developing Yucca, and that the blue-ribbon panel can identify a better plan for managing spent fuel and high-level waste, perhaps by reprocessing it.

But many observers think Obama's decision to whack Yucca fulfilled a promise that Obama made to Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.), who loathes Yucca, when Obama needed Reid's help and Nevada's votes while competing for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Simpson alluded to those allegations in suggesting the administration's decision on Yucca was politically motivated.

"I find it amazing that the blue-ribbon committee is going to look at geologic repositories, but the one geologic repository we are not going to look at has had 55 National Academy of Science studies done on it, the one we are not going to look at is Yucca Mountain [and that] indicates to me that is more political than it is science..." he said.

While U.S. nuclear waste policy is in disarray, the Swedish site selection announcement may put that country on track to develop one of the first underground, permanent nuclear repositories in the world.

Finland is developing a repository at Olkiluoto, with plans to open about 2020, and France hopes to open a repository in about 2025.

The site chosen for the Swedish repository, located on the country's southeast coast, was announced by SKB, a company formed by the nation's nuclear utilities. Osthrammar was selected over the municipality of Oskarshamn to host a spent fuel repository which SKB hopes to get regulatory approval for next year and to put into operation in 2023.

Both communities had been competing for a financial incentives package that SKB had been offering in association with the repository—an inducement that apparently overcame the "not in my backyard" stance that many communities take against proposed new nuclear facilities.

Both of the competing communities play host to existing nuclear power plants, a factor that often translates into higher acceptance of new proposed plants.

Somewhat ironically, the losing municipality of Oskarshamn, located further south on Sweden's east coast, already has an interim storage facility for high-level waste and a research facility on permanent burial of the waste.

The winning Osthrammar municipality will get an up-front payment of about \$60 million, plus the jobs and economic activity that the long-term project will bring the region, according to the World Nuclear Association (WNA).

The WNA says the losing municipality, Oskarshamn, will receive a one-time payment of about \$180 million.

In a statement, SKB said it chose the Osthrammar site because the rock at the planned depth of disposal—about 500 meters—was drier and had fewer cracks than the site at Oskarshamn.

"These properties are of a major significance for long-term safety," SKB said in the statement.

SKB has been evaluating the two sites since 2002, when they were picked from among eight potential repository sites.

The U.S. government has been working on Yucca since the late 1980s, when it was selected by Congress. The project in recent years made significant legal and regulatory process and early in 2003 was slated to open in 2015. But opposition from Reid, many Nevada officials and environmentalists weighed on the project.

Reid was particularly successful in cutting the project's budget annually, and now Obama's decision appears to have all but killed the project. However, apparently fearing lawsuits from utilities whose waste DOE is obligated to dispose of, the Obama administration has let the Nuclear Regulatory Commission continue to review a DOE license application for the project.