

Witnesses Highlight Missed Opportunity in Blue Ribbon Review of Nuclear Storage Options



Top Scientist testifies that Yucca Mountain meets regulatory requirements; Local officials voice support

OCT 27, 2011



Washington DC – Today, in a joint hearing of the Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight (I&O) and the Subcommittee on Energy and Environment (E&E), witnesses reviewed the draft recommendations contained in the Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Nuclear Future (BRC) **Draft Report** to the Secretary of Energy. The Subcommittees questioned the witnesses on science and technology issues associated with spent nuclear fuel management.

In his opening remarks, **I&O Chairman Paul Broun (R-GA)** said, "This Administration has long claimed that it makes its decisions based on science." However, regarding the specific direction that Energy Secretary Steven Chu gave to the BRC to exclude consideration of Yucca Mountain as an option for nuclear waste storage, Broun continued, "Any serious review of spent fuel management has to recognize the decades of research and billions of dollars in investment to ready Yucca Mountain to accept spent nuclear fuel."

Further highlighting the limitations of the BRC's recommendations, **E&E Chairman Andy Harris (R-MD)** said, "The action by the Administration is striking in that they suggest there is a better alternative without actually suggesting what or where that might be ." Harris continued, "Unless and until the Federal government honors its legal obligation to proceed with disposal of high-level radioactive waste, the long-term viability of nuclear energy to meet growing electricity demands remains in doubt."

Testifying today on the technical feasibility of permanent geological nuclear waste storage, **Dr. Peter Swift**, of the Sandia National Laboratory, agreed with the BRC's recommendation that "every foreseeable approach to the nuclear fuel cycle still requires a means of disposal that assures the very long-term isolation of radioactive wastes from the environment." Dr. Swift discussed how the technical basis for the Yucca Mountain repository application was developed by hundreds of scientists and multiple technical experts, yet those assessments have not been made public. He said that "One of the main conclusions of these analyses is that estimated releases and radiation doses to hypothetical future humans are well below the EPA and NRC standards," and that there is "sufficient technical basis for the NRC to issue a license authorizing construction of the facility."

In response to questioning from Chairman Harris regarding transparency of Yucca-related scientific assessments, witnesses agreed that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) should make its review of the Yucca Mountain license application, known as the Safety Evaluation Reports (SER), publicly available.

Another BRC recommendation, proposing to change the siting process to be more "consent-

based," was challenged today by a witness from Nye County, which is the community most directly impacted should Yucca Mountain be constructed. **Mr. Gary Hollis**, Chairman of the Nye County Board of County Commissioners, discussed the local role in overseeing technical and scientific studies, along with conducting independent analysis. Mr. Hollis said that "To ignore all this science, the law and the facts, not to mention this administration's stated 'scientific integrity policy,' because the BRC says Yucca Mountain does not have local support, is an insult to the process and contrary to the rule of law. Yucca Mountain does have local support. My presence here today confirms that."

The decision to terminate Yucca Mountain's license application has not only impacted Nevada, but every regional interim storage site in the nation. **Mr. Rick McLeod**, Executive Director of the Savannah River Site Reuse Organization, made clear his "strongly held concerns" that because of the Administration's decision, high-level defense waste will continue to be stored at the Savannah River Site, which he fears could become "the 'de facto' Yucca Mountain." Mr. McLeod said "We continue to believe Yucca Mountain was – and is – the right answer for permanent nuclear waste disposal, and its completion should be pursued vigorously, especially for high-level defense waste."

Chairman Broun entered into the hearing record a **report** prepared by the Committee's majority staff that refutes the Administration's claims that the decision to terminate the Yucca Mountain project was based on science. The Report also clearly demonstrates that the NRC independent evaluation of Yucca Mountain determined the proposed repository meets all applicable safety requirements, including those related to human health and groundwater protection, and the specific performance goals set forth by the regulatory agencies.

The following witnesses testified before the Committee:

Mr. Jack Spencer, Research Fellow, Nuclear Energy Policy, Heritage Foundation

Dr. Peter Swift, Distinguished Member of the Technical Staff, Sandia National Laboratory

Dr. Roger Kasperson, Professor and Distinguished Scientist, Clark University

Mr. Gary Hollis, Chairman, Nye County Board of County Commissioners

Mr. Rick McLeod, Executive Director, Savannah River Site Reuse Organization

Dr. Mark Peters, Deputy Laboratory Director for Programs, Argonne National Laboratory