

Monday, Aug. 10, 2009

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Sec. Chu: We need science, not politics

Dear Secretary Chu:

May we bend your ear for just a minute or two while you're in town?

First of all, welcome. We know you have a big job.

We understand that the Hanford site is just one of 16 nuclear sites in 13 states that store a legacy of 7,000 metric tons of high-level nuclear waste from U.S. weapons productions dating back to 1943.

That's a lot of waste.

So we're wondering just where we should put it all?

We thought we had a plan. Now we're not so sure.

We understand you are scheduled to come to us this afternoon after touring Yucca Mountain this morning.

Yucca Mountain -- the object of study for many years (at a cost of many billions of dollars) -- long ago was agreed upon to be the receptor for waste storage.

Yucca Mountain -- large enough that when all the current waste was safely stored away inside, it still only would be 10 percent full and would serve our nuclear storage needs for many, many years to come.

Yucca Mountain -- the pet peeve of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., -- seems to have come to a screeching halt, one that smells more of a political decision than a scientific one.

We also understand that one of the items on your schedule while you're here is to make a joint announcement with Gov. Gregoire regarding a lawsuit concerning the Tri-Party Agreement.

Honoring the Tri-Party Agreement is important to us. It is one way the federal government keeps its obligations to this community.

But to clean up the residue from the Manhattan Project, we need more than money. We need a place to put the waste.

Without Yucca Mountain, or a similarly acceptable storage facility, the Department of Energy can't keep up its end of the Tri-Party Agreement, no matter how much money we receive (all of which we appreciate, by the way).

We are nearing the halfway mark of completing our vitrification plant. By 2020 we will be ready to ship large glass logs of vitrified nuclear waste for storage. We then will need the shipping address of where you want those logs to go.

We are supposed to send them to Yucca Mountain. That's been the plan all along. But those plans appear to be changing.

We know you have been charged with appointing a blue ribbon commission to study alternatives to the Yucca Mountain Repository. We think it will be important to the scientific process to have the conclusions from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's review of the Yucca Mountain license application to compare them with what already has been studied.

That brings up another question. What will the blue ribbon commission study that has not already been studied?

A literature search reveals more than 55 studies on high-level waste and spent fuel management and disposal conducted by the National Academy of Sciences that date back to 1957. There are another 45 studies on DOE site cleanup and 19 more studies on low-level nuclear and transuranic waste.

Five potential repository sites were studied extensively before Yucca Mountain was chosen as the best candidate. Subsequently, there have been 20 years of studies on Yucca Mountain alone, culminating in the license application submitted by DOE to the NRC in June 2008. These studies represent more than 50 years of research at a cost of billions of dollars.

We and our community want to know from you what is left for a new blue ribbon commission to study and how much longer we must wait before we can move forward with a realistic nuclear waste policy and solutions.

If not Yucca Mountain, then where? And if not now, then when?