

## Chu To Nuke Panel: Repository Needed; Yucca Review, Not

BY GEORGE LOBSENZ

Energy Secretary Steven Chu Thursday convened the first meeting of his blue-ribbon nuclear waste study commission by telling panel members that while a final disposal repository will clearly be needed, he does not want them looking back to determine if the proposed Yucca Mountain repository was “a bad decision or a good decision” nor does he want them to propose possible new sites for a repository.

For their part, commission members pledged an independent review of nuclear waste disposal options, and agreed that there was no environmental or safety crisis demanding immediate action by the government to set a new policy course even though the Obama administration already is moving to kill Yucca Mountain.

Still, commission members said there clearly was urgency to their task because the lack of waste disposal options without Yucca was causing a crisis of confidence that was undermining the rebirth of the nuclear power industry, which they agreed was vital to the nation’s hopes of growing new low-carbon domestic energy sources.

Not mentioned by the panel members was the billions of dollars in additional nuclear waste disposal obligations looming over the Energy Department—and by extension, over taxpayers—now that the administration has ruled Yucca off the table in a decision that many industry officials see as a political favor to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.), who strongly opposes the project.

Indeed, the subject of Yucca Mountain was the invisible elephant in the room at the commission’s inaugural meeting, and might have stayed that way without a polite but insistent query from former Sen. Pete Domenici (R-N.M.) to Chu about how he and his fellow commissioners should handle the politically touchy subject of Yucca.

In response to Domenici, Chu publicly confirmed that the Obama administration had specifically instructed the commission not examine the reams of geological and environmental modeling data developed by the government over the last 25 years on Yucca Mountain to determine whether the Nevada site could safely confine radionuclides for centuries.

“It is correct to say we are going to look to the future,” Chu said in response to Domenici’s request for clarification on Yucca.

“What I don’t want the commission to do is look at past history,” the secretary added, saying a question the panel should not be trying to answer is “was Yucca Mountain a bad decision or a good decision?”

Chu’s remarks are not surprising in that he and President Obama have repeatedly stated that they already have decided that Yucca Mountain is a dead letter because there are better options for dealing with the nation’s spent reactor fuel and high-level radioactive waste left over from past nuclear weapons production by the government.

However, as in past statements, Chu provided few specifics on what was wrong with the Yucca project, saying only that waste piling up at the nation’s reactors and at the Energy Department’s nuclear weapons site could be safely stored in dry casks for decades while the nation sorts through options for charting a new course on disposal.

Chu once again suggested that spent fuel reprocessing—in which uranium and plutonium are extracted from waste for re-use—and the use of fast neutron reactors could greatly reduce the amount of waste needing final disposal. He urged the panel to look at those alternatives.

However, he acknowledged that those technologies were far from technical or commercial maturity and would need decades of research and development.

Not mentioned by Chu was that past reprocessing operations have generated vast quantities of high-level waste that now need final disposal, and that reprocessing can be used

nigh-level nuclear waste now needing geological disposal, and that reprocessing can be used to separate weapons-usable plutonium.

And Chu did not go into the political problems facing fast reactors, which are strongly opposed by environmental and nonproliferation groups allied with the Obama administration because such reactors can be adapted to breed weapons-usable plutonium.

In addition, DOE documents obtained by *The Energy Daily* show White House officials last year initially sought to bar DOE research on fast reactors, relenting only when Chu complained that fast reactors would be a key area of study for the blue-ribbon commission.

And even if reprocessing and fast reactors come into broad use in the future, Chu noted, “eventually there will be [spent] fuel with no economic value” that needs “final disposition.”

But while acknowledging the need for a repository, Chu was emphatic in telling commission members that their job was not to identify possible sites for a U.S. repository.

“This is not a siting commission,” he said. “This is not to pick sites for a repository in the United States.”

However, the need for a repository—and the excruciating political problems of siting one—were clearly on the minds of some commission members.

Alison Macfarlane, a Yucca critic and associate professor of environmental science and policy at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., said that no matter what nuclear waste management policy might be adopted by the government, “we need some kind of geological repository.

“We can’t escape that fact. We will have to deal with that.”

Macfarlane suggested the commission might want to look at the way the Swedish government had found a community willing to host a repository. She said the commission should consider visiting Forsmark, the town selected as the repository site, to learn how the Swedes managed to find a volunteer community to host the facility.

SKB, the Swedish company responsible for building the repository, announced last June it had selected the town of Forsmark over another community, Laxemar, as its preferred site for the repository. Both communities already host nuclear facilities and they competed for the repository, with both getting financial benefits for agreeing to be the site of the repository.

Domenici recommended the panel visit Carlsbad, N.M., where DOE has operated the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, an underground repository for plutonium waste, for 10 years without incident. He also said he saw promise in reprocessing, which he noted was abandoned by the United States several decades ago as a proliferation risk.

The blue-ribbon commission, chaired by former Rep. Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.) and Brent Scowcroft, former national security advisor to the first President Bush, is supposed to produce an interim report of recommendations for Chu within 18 months.