

Savannah River Site

Citizens Advisory Board

Recommendation 314
Planning for Disposition of SRS Canisters

Background

Disposition of SRS defense waste in the form of DWPF canisters to an off-site location has been in the planning stage for a number of years. The Savannah River Site (SRS) has been the interim storage site for defense waste (in the form of DWPF canisters) and other nuclear waste (both domestic and foreign Spent Nuclear Fuel) for half a century. There is a need to formulate a plan to get this waste off-site.

The 1982 Nuclear Waste Policy Act (NWPA), amended in 1987 designated Yucca Mountain as the national site to be developed for America's permanent waste repository. This planning was interrupted in 2011 when the Obama administration directed the Department of Energy Secretary, Dr. Steven Chu, to withdraw its application from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) for licensing the site for that function. This decision to no longer consider Yucca Mountain as a disposition site for nuclear waste appeared to be a political decision since no technical basis was ever presented for such an action. A recent Government Accountability Office report found that there appears to be no scientific evidence supporting claims that the Nevada site is geologically inappropriate as a national waste repository. For the past two or so years the disposition planning for the SRS canisters has become very clouded and uncertain.

Following the withdrawal action for licensing Yucca Mountain, the President established a Blue Ribbon Commission (BRC) for the purpose of identifying alternatives to Yucca Mountain that could accommodate America's current and future nuclear waste. The BRC released its final report in July of 2012 with general recommendations that must be evaluated by various relevant federal and state agencies. Recommendations emerging from those evaluations will then be subject to consideration by a number of federal and state agencies as a national waste management program is developed.

Recent court actions in August 2013 (based on court challenges by Aiken County) have directed the administration to once again consider Yucca Mountain as the national nuclear waste disposition site. A recent federal study recommended that planning for a federal repository commence immediately. All these uncoordinated and unfocused actions make it likely that a repository is still years away. However, since a federal repository is now once again viable the Board feels that planning for nuclear waste disposition should commence immediately. Further, the Board feels that the waste at SRS may be uniquely useful as a federal repository is planned and developed.

Discussion

Since a federal repository is once again a candidate to receive nuclear waste from SRS, Environmental Management in HQ should work with their counterparts in HQ Waste Management to ensure that projections for current DP nuclear waste quantities (specifically the SRS canisters) are included in the latest planning. Whatever agency or organization is charged

with implementing the federal repository program should also be made aware of the urgency of dealing with the DP waste and the state of readiness of the DP waste along with the current quantities.

Further, it seems that this revitalization of interest in a federal repository may also offer another opportunity for use of SRS canisters. In the event that it becomes necessary to have a demonstration program for disposition, perhaps it would be useful to demonstrate the disposition of nuclear waste using one or more of the SRS canisters. The canisters are “disposition ready” and may be a useful tool for such a study. In our view this aspect should at least be considered.

Recommendations

The SRS CAB recommends that:

1. DOE-Environmental Management work with and advise the organization charged with implementing a federal repository nuclear waste program relative to the latest DP quantities and the “state of readiness” of the SRS canisters.
2. DOE- Environmental Management offer for consideration use of the SRS canisters for a federal repository demonstration program in the event such a program is considered useful or necessary.