

On Yucca Mountain

By Mary Manning

LAS VEGAS SUN

Las Vegas native Bob Haygood said he is neutral on the controversial nuclear waste repository project at Yucca Mountain, where the government wants to bury 77,000 tons of high-level radioactive waste.

Haygood worked at the Nevada Test Site preparing deep holes for underground nuclear-weapons experiments from 1978 until 1995 and is a certified welding inspector familiar with using X-rays to examine pipeline welds.

"I'm not for it, I'm not against it," Haygood said about the proposed repository Monday night, when 128 people visited Cashman Field Center to comment on the Energy Department's Yucca Mountain Project at the last public scoping meeting before an environmental impact statement is released next year.

"The problem with radiation is that most people are ignorant about it," Haygood said. "People are scared to death of it."

Haygood said that other energy sources, such as gasoline and natural gas, are also dangerous.

Bud Tangren, a Las Vegas fence builder since the 1950s, supported the Yucca project.

"I'm in favor of the dump," Tangren said. "Give us \$10 billion a year, then bring it on."

Of course, no one has promised the state \$10 billion in exchange for serving as the permanent home for the nation's high-level nuclear waste, much less \$10 billion per year.

Yucca supporters like Tangren were in the clear minority, with at least two-thirds of the people opposed, including state and Clark County officials.

Despite the Energy Department's preferred route bringing the bulk of the nuclear waste shipments through Caliente northeast of Las Vegas in Lincoln County, the critical issue is the number of trains or trucks that will travel through Las Vegas on railroad tracks or interstate highways, said Bob Halstead, transportation expert for the state of Nevada.

The nuclear waste routes have not been designated yet, Halstead said. Weather and the time of year could increase rail shipments on the Union Pacific's tracks that run through downtown Las Vegas, or trucks could haul nuclear waste containers on Interstate 15, U.S. 95 or U.S. 93.

The state estimates up to 89 percent of the 130 nuclear waste rail shipments expected annually could pass through downtown Las Vegas, Halstead said.

The proposed 319-mile rural rail route from Caliente, around the Air Force's Testing and Training Range and into Yucca Mountain, poses its own set of problems, Halstead said, primarily from Nevada's geography.

The first 100 miles of the current Caliente rail corridor crosses, skirts or dodges seven mountain ranges, Halstead said.



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Richard Tangren makes his case for the Yucca Mountain Project with Marjorie Detraz, center, of Caliente and her niece, Judy Call, of St. George, Utah, both with the Lincoln County Opposition Committee, at the Energy Department's public meeting Monday at Cashman Center. Tangren said he used to work as an ironworker at the Nevada Test Site.

"It means you are going to have safety concerns on routes because of grades and in the valleys because of speed, up to 60 mph," Halstead said.

Clark County's emergency rescue teams would have to respond to a nuclear waste accident in Southern Nevada, Utah, Arizona or Southern California, said Irene Navis, director of the county's Nuclear Waste Division.

Nevada's largest county in population has the most ability, manpower and equipment, Navis said.

The county has agreements with all contiguous counties to respond in the case of an accident, such as a recent tour bus collision, Navis said.

With nuclear waste, Clark County's emergency responders will be spread thinner, Navis said. "While the agreements work well, we are going to be tested to the limit," she said.

Surveyor Russ Avery's biggest concern was thousands of acres of land in Nye County, in the shadow of Yucca Mountain, 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas. These rural acres support grazing cattle and raising alfalfa, he said.

If a radioactive spill occurred during transportation, it could threaten the ground water for the ranchers in the area, Avery said.

For Indian tribes such as the Western Shoshone and the Moapa Valley Band of Paiutes, the nuclear waste repository threatens cultural sites, since archaeological surveys have been conducted in less than 1 percent of the Caliente corridor.

Calvin Meyer, chairman of the Moapa Valley Band of Paiutes, said that he had just learned of Monday's hearing. "We didn't even know about it until this morning," he said.

For the past 20 years the Air Force has been concerned about the possibility nuclear waste might be shipped across its Testing and Training Range, Nellis Air Force Base spokesman Mike Estrada said.

However, the Air Force, the

Bureau of Land Management and the Surface Transportation Board have applied for cooperating agency status to oversee the Energy Department's development of shipping routes through Nevada. Col. Bob Zielinski, Air Force liaison with the Energy Department, said.

Pentagon officials have said that they need "elbow room" to train an international fleet of military pilots on the unique training range spanning southern and central Nevada, Zielinski said.

Most important is to protect buffer zones around firing ranges, he said.

"We don't have competing missions, but complimentary ones," Zielinski said, "if we cooperate ahead of time."

The Bureau of Land Management agreed in December 2003 to a two-year segregation of 308,600 acres of land along the Caliente corridor. The withdrawal will protect the proposed corridor from mining claims and other uses for about two years, said Jackie Gratton of the BLM's Las Vegas Field Office.

In May the BLM will formally request that land-use planning be added as an issue to the environmental scoping required by the Energy Department.

The Surface Transportation Board would have to issue a license to the Energy Department if the special track to Yucca Mountain would be used for commercial freight, said Dave Navecky representing the board.

The Sierra Club and seven other environmental organizations oppose the nuclear waste repository and transporting waste across the nation, Tara Smith, the club's conservation organizer, said.

When Peggy Maze Johnson, executive director of Citizen Alert, walked into the hearing, she saw a sign reading, "Transporting nuclear waste is safe."

"How do we know?" Johnson asked.

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