

Statement of Mary Callaghan
Chairperson
Salt Lake County Commission
Before Congressman Cook
of the United States House of Representatives
December 2, 1997

Congressman Cook, representatives of the media, ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of the Salt Lake County Board of Commissioners welcome to Utah. The Salt Lake County Board of Commissioners has considered the issue at hand and now speaks with unanimity in opposing the placement of a so-called temporary nuclear waste repository on the Skull Valley Goshute Indian Reservation which is a scant 35 miles west of Salt Lake County. We have three concerns which I shall list below:

First, there is considerable doubt on our part as to whether the 'temporary' site will actually be temporary. Given the political, legal and technical wrangling over the proposed permanent site in Nevada and the repeated delays which it has already experienced, there is a very real possibility that the Skull Valley Goshute site could become permanent. This would be a disaster. We would end up with permanent, above-ground storage of nuclear waste casks exposed to the elements. With a half-life of 10,000 years for the nuclear waste in question, there would almost certainly be some sort of leakage over time. This simply cannot be allowed to happen and we call upon the Congress to make certain of that.

Second, Utah does not produce any nuclear waste and the logic as to why we should store it for those who do totally escapes us. The nuclear utility companies contend they are running out of storage space. We reply, why should that be our problem? There are current acceptable methods for storing nuclear waste on the sites where it is being generated. It would seem logical that additions to existing facilities could be built at those sites. This would eliminate the necessity of transporting the waste until a permanent facility is built and insure no more locations than necessary are despoiled with nuclear waste.

Third, the issue of the transportation of nuclear waste has been revisited many times. We have seen the films of a truck carrying a nuclear waste cask crashing into a cement wall and surviving intact. We do not doubt that in a perfect world the engineers could put enough steel into a cask that it would withstand most accidents. Unfortunately, in the real world casks have been discovered with hairline fractures and one has exploded while in the process of being filled; hardly comforting thoughts.

Also, through the years, should this unfortunate proposal be approved, the handling of the containers will become routine for the technicians involved. Eventually, a mistake will be made; a nut will not be tightened properly, a gasket will be misaligned, etc., which will leave us open to the tragic possibility of a nuclear waste spill in the middle of Salt Lake County with a population approaching one million people.

In closing, if a nuclear power plant were located in Utah and we were consumers of the electricity generated therefrom, we would be more understanding of the need for a waste disposal site in Utah. However, such is not the case. We should not be the nation's dumping ground. Speaking on behalf of the Salt Lake County Board of Commissioners, we urge you to put a stop to this blatantly unfair imposition upon the health and safety of the citizens of Salt Lake County. Thank you.

MERRILL COOK
OPENING REMARKS
HEARING ON SKULL VALLEY GOSHUTES PROPOSED HIGH LEVEL NUCLEAR
WASTE SITE
DECEMBER 2, 1997

Introduction

Good afternoon everyone. Thank you for coming today. I would particularly like to thank Gov. Mike Leavitt and our panelists for joining us today. I think we will have a series of excellent presentations today on an issue vitally important to every Utahn.

I'm holding this hearing because I want the public to understand the implications of this proposal to store nuclear waste on the Goshute Reservation. Utah leaders are deeply worried by this proposal. The way this proposal is structured, your state government will have no power to regulate the storage of this deadly waste in its own state boundaries.

Your governor and federal delegation are working hard to halt this proposal. But I have realized recently that most Utahns don't know very much about this plan to store 40 years of accumulated nuclear waste here in Utah. With the pressures of our daily lives and our personal concerns, most of us haven't had a chance to focus on this yet.

Utahns need to understand this proposal. We can't afford not to. Utah has a uniquely tragic history with radiation. We will never really know how many Utahns have died because of the repeated above ground atomic testing in Nevada during the 1950s. According to a recent study by the National Cancer Institute, those tests exposed 25 counties in Utah to an average of 9 to 16 rads of fallout. Children, who were more likely to drink contaminated milk, were exposed to as much as seven times that amount of radiation.

People in this state still suffering the deadly effects of those tests. We have accelerated rates of certain kinds of cancer as far north as Cache Valley that many blame on these tests.

When those tests were done, people in Nevada and Utah were told they were harmless. Many deliberately rushing outside to see the atomic explosion light up the sky, having no idea of the suffering and grief those tests would one day bring.

Years later, scores of Utah men went down into central Utah's uranium mines to bring out uranium for the government's atomic and nuclear programs. That uranium was so deadly that virtually every one of those miners contracted lung cancer. Most of them died. The cancer was so vicious that some of them died within a month of being diagnosed.

Like residents in Southern Utah, these men were told those Marysvale mines were safe. They found to their horror that nothing could have been more deadly.

Utah has had bitter experiences with radiation projects we believed were safe. We were told they were safe and we believed what we were told.

We can never be that trusting again. Utahns owe it to themselves and their children to learn as much as possible about any proposal involving potentially deadly radiation in our state. This hearing today is intended to be one small step toward educating the public about this proposal.

I would like to briefly outline some of my own concerns with this proposal.

Prospect of Permanent Site

First, I fear that what is being billed as a temporary site will become a permanent site. Private Fuel Storage, the consortium of nuclear utilities seeking to store their waste here waste here has emphasized that their NRC license will be for 20 years, and that their lease with the Skull Valley Goshutes is for 25 years with a 25 year renewal option. PFS also correctly points out that under current law, only the U.S. government can permanently dispose of nuclear waste. I have no doubt about PFS' sincerity and its intent to make this a temporary site. However, laws can be amended, licenses can be renewed and leases can be renegotiated.

Once the high level waste is in place at the Skull Valley site, political and economic pressures could easily overwhelm today's good intentions. With the waste removed from reactors scattered around the country and assembled at a single site, legislative and bureaucratic inertia, combined with the unwillingness of other states to accept the waste, could easily transform an "interim" site into a permanent site. In fact, a report by the Nuclear Waste Technical Review Board warned that development of an interim storage facility could jeopardize the effort to develop a permanent underground repository. I do not want the rest of the country to say, "just leave the waste in Utah."

What I've Done

I have been very public about my opposition to this proposal. Let me tell you what I'm doing to try to stop it. On June 26, I introduced H.R. 2083, copies of which are available today. H.R. 2083 will amend the Hazardous Materials Transportation Act to impose penalties on any shipment of nuclear waste to the Skull Valley Goshutes reservation. The bill imposes a fine of \$25,000 for each unit or cask of waste that is shipped, for each day that the cask is in transit. Obviously, the intent of this bill is to make it economically impossible to store high level waste on the Skull Valley Goshutes reservation. It was necessary to draft the legislation in this manner, imposing fines for shipment, because the Goshutes' sovereign status precluded a more direct prohibition.

In October, I worked with Representative Hansen to eliminate a provision in Yucca Mountain legislation, that would have directed the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to fast-track applications for storage facilities like the one proposed at Skull Valley. If the provision had passed, the NRC would be legally required to review this application at "the earliest practicable date."

To me, the idea of fast-tracking any proposal for the storage of nuclear waste is appalling. If there is any issue that should be thoroughly, carefully and repeatedly reviewed, it is a proposal for the storage of potentially deadly nuclear waste.

I do want to say that while I strongly oppose PFS' plans, their representatives have been very courteous and open in their visits with me. I appreciate that. While we may have differences on a very serious issue, I do not think that should bar a reasoned debate on that issue. They have asked to participate in today's hearing. I welcome their participation. Their input is critical to an open, thorough debate on this proposal.

I will work to advance H.R. 2083 through Congress and to do whatever else I can to stop this proposal. In this effort, I know that I stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the rest of Utah's Congressional delegation and with Governor Leavitt, who has taken a real leadership role on this issue.

Now, I'd like to turn the time over to Gov. Leavitt.