



## Guest column: This could be a ‘breakthrough’ year

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***Dana Kirkham***

INL is the nation’s lead nuclear research lab but, without spent fuel, it’s difficult to conduct research, writes Dana Kirkham.

The U.S. Department of Energy has 17 national laboratories located in 14 states. Only Idaho has a Settlement Agreement governing waste cleanup and disposal. The value of our 1995 agreement is enormous because it protects our environment and people.

The Settlement Agreement brought accountability to DOE, and has been incredibly successful, including treatment of more than 1 million tons of radioactive liquid waste. The 2013 Leadership in Nuclear Energy (LINE) Commission report said 959 of 964 mandated deadlines had been met and tons of waste shipped out of Idaho.

The agreement also contains provisions that allow it to be amended. In 2008 the Navy successfully negotiated an addendum.

And, in 2011, Attorney General Lawrence Wasden and Gov. C.L. “Butch” Otter signed a memorandum of agreement (MOA) that allowed into Idaho National Laboratory limited quantities of used commercial fuel for research.

One missed cleanup deadline, however, has had huge consequences for INL’s research mission and Idaho’s economy, and tells us that our 23-year-old agreement needs updating.

That came in 2012, when DOE failed to begin processing the last 900,000 gallons of liquid waste at the site. When that deadline was missed, Wasden stopped two scheduled commercial nuclear fuel shipments. Clearly, the attorney general is in a difficult place, with a duty to enforce the agreement and, as he attempted to do in 2011 by signing the spent fuel MOA, ensure INL’s important R&D mission.

Contributing to the complexity of this issue are changes made in 2005. At that time, DOE separated cleanup and research functions at the site. Today they are handled by different contractors working under separate contracts. That leaves INL in the uncomfortable position of having its vital clean energy and national security research affected by factors out of its control.

INL is the nation’s lead nuclear research lab and, to state the obvious, without spent fuel it is difficult to conduct research. The first shipment scheduled for INL instead went to Oak Ridge National Laboratory. The loss of these shipments could cost Idaho millions of dollars.

Idahoans need to address this issue, because it's not going away. In 1995, when the Settlement Agreement was signed, the state and federal governments anticipated having a national repository to dispose of waste imported into Idaho during the Cold War.

Because of the federal government's inability to open a national waste repository, approaching Settlement Agreement deadlines are likely to go unmet.

But I am confident we can find a solution to this difficult problem this year, for three reasons:

1. DOE's Advanced Mixed Waste Treatment Plant (AMWTP) should complete treatment of TRU waste brought to Idaho from Rocky Flats by the end of this year. AMWTP is a multi-billion dollar facility with the ability to treat waste from across the DOE complex. This saves taxpayer money, and advances the national interest of treating waste from our atomic past and moving it to be safely stored. The problem is the agreement that created the AMWTP mission prevents it from continuing. The completion of its mission may accelerate discussions about AMWTP's future because time is running out.

2. The Integrated Waste Treatment Unit facility, designed to treat the remaining liquid waste, is set for a simulant run early this year. Hopefully, solutions are imminent.

3. Last fall, officials from DOE, DOE-Idaho, Wasden, and state and local officials met. Important questions were identified and a path forward established. It is vital this momentum continues.

Federal, state, and local officials have an obligation to update the 1995 Settlement Agreement without diminishing the vital protections it provides to our environment and people. Let us resolve to continue cleaning up the site while enabling INL's vital R&D mission.

It won't be easy, but nothing worth doing ever is. The time has come to find a deal that works for everyone.

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