

READER COMMENT

Reader Comment: DOE must explain high-level waste Reclassification



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The Idaho Settlement Agreement requires the radioactive calcine waste to be treated for shipment out of Idaho by 2035. The Department of Energy has issued a Record of Decision on how it proposes to treat the calcine for its transportation and disposal.

But Brad Little stated at the Leadership in Nuclear Energy Commission meeting held in Arco on May 24 that there wasn't enough money in the U.S. Treasury to treat the calcine.

The minutes of LINE meeting, chaired by Little, are still not available. It was also pointed out at that meeting that it was problematic that the LINE's draft brochure to describe the calcine issues at the Idaho National Laboratory contained new policy not approved by the state. The public has not been told what the new policies on calcine are being considered.

In July, the Idaho Cleanup Project Citizens Advisory Board was asked to vote to endorse the DOE looking at waste reclassification, yet no presentation was given, the public was not informed of the vote, and in the short briefing prior to the vote, there was no mention of calcine or high-level waste.

The DOE maneuvers continue to keep the public in the dark.

Last November, the DOE issued for public comment its proposal to allow the DOE to unilaterally reclassify its high-level waste (HLW) to non-HLW.

The millions of curies of radionuclides, including long-lived radionuclides, contained in the highly soluble HLW calcine pose a serious risk to the Snake River Plain aquifer. While corrosion of the metal bin sets that the calcine is stored in is not the limiting factor, the degrading concrete surrounding the bin sets

above and below ground and vulnerability to seismic events and flooding remain serious safety issues despite decades of DOE's downplaying the risks. The LINE Commission chair was told last May that nuclear waste can be sent to Yucca Mountain for disposal within 7 years of the restart of licensing. But with regard to DOE's high-level waste, the DOE is making excuses about how the HLW calcine can't be shipped to Yucca Mountain because there is no repository. Through the Energy Communities Alliance, which are communities excluding Idaho, it is claimed that reclassification by the DOE of its High-Level Waste would "allow DOE to dispose of waste in accordance with its radiological characteristics and ability to meet appropriate disposal facility requirements rather than the waste's origin." Furthermore "under the current interpretation based on artificial standards, [HLW] can only go to a HLW repository... If DOE moves to more appropriately align disposal decisions based on actual risk, some of this waste may be safely managed as transuranic or low-level waste and can be moved out of our communities sooner while saving significant taxpayer dollars."

The reality is that allowing the DOE to reclassify its HLW to "non-HLW" will mean that vast amounts of the DOE's HLW become low-level waste (LLW). While this could mean some of the waste is shipped to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico — if laws for WIPP change — it also means that the DOE has far fewer regulatory requirements about how it chooses to dispose of the LLW on its DOE sites.

The reclassified HLW would become low-level waste with no limit as to how high the concentrations of long-lived fission products, activation products or transuranic waste can be. The DOE's proposed reclassification of HLW isn't about clearing up the ambiguity of what is and is not HLW or correcting "artificial standards."

The DOE's proposed reclassification of HLW is about: (1) eliminating federal requirements pertaining to HLW disposal, (2) reclassifying vast amounts of high-level waste, not just "incidental" waste remaining in tanks, (3) removing tank closure requirements of the federal law that required U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission involvement and state approval, and (4) allowing DOE to shallowly bury its HLW waste on DOE sites.

The public must demand that the DOE explain how its proposed HLW reclassification may affect existing commitments with Idaho, as well as other states.

I think it is time for Brad Little to represent Idaho's interests, not the Department of Energy's. And he can start with some transparency so the public knows what's really going on.