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NEVADA VIEWS: Nuke shipments are safe

Transportation to Yucca Mountain nothing for Nevadans to worry about

By Dr. Denis E. Beller, University of Nevada at Las Vegas

In an absence of complete information, it has proven easy for the opponents of the Yucca Mountain repository to raise fears about the transportation of used commercial nuclear fuel and high-level radioactive waste to the site. But as more specifics are learned about transportation, and details develop regarding shipments to Yucca Mountain, my fellow residents of Nevada can feel confident about the technology and the process.

The announcement late last year that more than 90 percent of the shipments will travel by rail, over the "Caliente" route which would keep it 90 miles from Las Vegas at all times, should add to that confidence. This is the conclusion of the final environmental impact statement: Rail shipments are inherently more secure, they are more efficient so there will be fewer shipments, and the route chosen is particularly remote from cities and populated areas.

History has taught us that the transportation of nuclear materials is safe. During the past 40 years there have been thousands of shipments in the United States of used nuclear fuel, traveling more than 1.6 million miles, of which almost one-quarter were by rail. Since 1990 almost two-thirds of the shipments have been by railroad. There has never been a release of radioactive material from those shipments, even though there have been train accidents involving nuclear fuel.

In the few transportation accidents that have occurred, the shipping containers performed perfectly, preventing harm to the cargo and any release of radioactive material. We are not alone in shipping these materials. France and Britain together average 650 shipments per year, and have already shipped as much used fuel as is destined for Yucca Mountain.

It is important to remember that what is being shipped is a solid ceramic sealed in many layers of a variety of metals, so there is really nothing to spill. Even in the extremely unlikely case that a container might be breached, the material would be confined to a small area with little hazard to the public and no measurable health consequences.

Many agencies will oversee the shipment of spent nuclear fuel and waste. The Department of Transportation will closely regulate shipping and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission will impose its requirements for safe preparation, handling and transport. That includes certified containers, advance approvals and notification of local and state authorities. States, local, regional and tribal authorities will all be involved in the process of routing and shipping the material. There is even an existing working group of these organizations set up to keep them involved at every step.

The state of Nevada needs to move from being obstructionist to really looking out for the interests of its citizens. A new rail line will need to be constructed, and we need to ensure that it meets all our environmental requirements and that impacts to communities are minimized. We need to participate in everything from understanding the latest research on safe rail transportation and container design to emergency planning and readiness for any contingency. Train accidents do occur, and although hazardous quantities of radioactive material would not be released, we still must be prepared to deal with all the possibilities.

We also need to get real about the scale of the shipments. There will be about 175 spent fuel and waste trains per year. Thousands of trucks and trains traveling daily through our state -- supplying everything from hazardous materials such as explosive gasoline, toxic chlorine and many carcinogens to the mundane components of concrete -- dwarf the rate of shipment of used nuclear fuel.

In this country there are 300,000 shipments every day of petroleum products alone. Even the most hazardous of these materials, toxic gases and explosives, will not see the level of escort, guarding, oversight and 24-hour satellite tracking that nuclear fuel does. Nevada can opt to have the shipments escorted during their entire travel in the state. The DOE will also train any state or local personnel involved in safeguarding the shipments or responding to emergencies; that training will benefit every citizen along the transportation routes.

While there is little for Nevadans to be concerned about regarding the shipment of used nuclear fuel and waste, there are significant benefits to be gained. Payments to the state mandated by law cannot be made unless shipments begin to take place.

The current schedule is to have the transportation system in place, including the rail line constructed, in 2007, and to have shipments begin in 2010. We cannot get those promised funds until then, and any delay means that much longer we have to wait for the federal money.

There is only one conclusion. The proposed rail shipments to Yucca Mountain will have minimal adverse effects on our environment and none on our people. Yet our failure to be engaged in the process can leave us out of important decision-making, and it can cost the state funds we can surely use.

Dr. Denis E. Beller is a research professor at UNLV and the Idaho State University, where he conducts research to develop advanced technology for recycling used nuclear fuel while reducing the quantity and radiotoxicity of the waste from that recycling.