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San Onofre nuclear waste going nowhere fast

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During the 2001 California electricity crisis, I visited San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station and wrote about it for the Register: “With the lights and air conditioners set to go out in summer blackouts, everyone is scrambling for more energy production.” SONGS was a big part of the mix, being refurbished at the time and generating 1,127 megawatts, enough electricity to power about 845,000 homes, or one-fourth of Orange County.

Today, there haven’t been any major blackouts in years, and, in 2012, after a radiation leak, SONGS was shut down permanently. The shuttering cost is estimated at \$4.4 billion over 20 years, two-thirds of it coming from ratepayers.

A big problem remains: Where to put the nuclear waste? As I noted in 2001, California banned building any new nuclear plants until a national solution was found on where to put the spent fuel.

The California Coastal Commission met Tuesday in Long Beach and approved a staff recommendation to keep San Onofre’s waste on the site. An Oct. 5 Register news story reported, “The waste would remain in this Independent Spent Fuel Storage Installation through 2049, when Edison assumes that the federal Department of Energy will have taken custody of all spent nuclear fuel. It would then be torn down, and the site on Camp Pendleton property restored, by 2051, the staff report says.”

Good luck with that. The problem with the long-term storage of nuclear material from SONGS and other U.S. nuclear power plants is the holdup of the Yucca Mountain storage site in Nevada.

According to a summary by the libertarian Cato Institute, “In 2010, the Obama administration, with strong urging from Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, a Democrat from Nevada, decided to close down the Yucca Mountain site. The Government Accountability Office said the administration did not cite any ‘technical or safety issues’ for the closure.”

No alternate site was designated. After Republicans became the majority in the Senate this year, Reid became the minority leader, but he still wields veto power over the site.

An October 2014 Safety Evaluation Report by the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission found “that the proposed repository at Yucca Mountain 1) is comprised of multiple barriers, and 2) based on performance assessment evaluations that are in compliance with applicable regulatory requirements.” The repository includes “limits for individual protection, human intrusion and separate standards for protection of groundwater.”

Some conservatives and libertarians have attacked Reid for selling out the national interests of nuclear power development and energy independence to placate local constituencies. But others have pointed out that, even though Yucca Mountain is on federal land, under federalist principles the locals have a right to a say in its use. Numerous lawsuits continue to wind through the court system.

What about other sites? Competition?

The 1982 Nuclear Waste Policy Act passed by Congress effectively shut down previous efforts at a competitive private waste-disposal system. According to an article in Ecology Law Quarterly in 2000, the NWPA “resulted in the federal government subsidizing, and thus encouraging, the continued existence of the nuclear industry.” The subsidies made nuclear-generated electricity cheaper, thus encouraging more generation and more subsequent waste than in a private market.

After dawdling for years, eventually “the federal government had to rush to develop a nuclear waste repository.” Which still isn’t being developed.

This year’s Coastal Commission report warned that “the proposed” storage at SONGS “could be required beyond 2051, possibly for many decades.” And the storage site “would eventually be exposed to coastal flooding and erosion hazards beyond its design capacity, or else would require protection by replacing or expanding the existing SONGS shoreline armoring.”

Nuclear power from San Onofre provided cheap electricity for decades, but for many more decades we’ll be paying the price to close it.