

## Utah Tribe Divided Over Nuclear Waste

*The waste site is worth more money than any number of Casinos and would give the tribe a direct stake in society.*

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Leon Bear, a stocky man in T-shirt and jeans, peers across the sagebrush-pocked valley where his ancestors once chased Pony Express riders and sees the future for his dwindling tribe.

Just west of the gun-barrel straight, two-lane road that darts through the Skull Valley Goshute Reservation, Bear wants to store 4,000 steel and concrete canisters of highly radioactive used fuel from nuclear power plants.

The American Indian tribe would reap tens of millions of dollars in rent over the next 40 years.

"I've been shown there's no problem. The way they plan to handle it, it's safe," the 46-year-old tribal leader insists, escorting a visitor around the reservation in a glistening new pickup truck.

The truck is an example of the largess the tribe already has received from a consortium of eight electric utilities. Nine years ago, the companies signed a lease with the tribe to put 40,000 tons of reactor waste on the reservation.

It is the kind of deal that other tribes have rejected, that most communities would oppose, that spells "not in my back yard" in the brightest of colors. Utah's establishment in Salt Lake City, the capital 45 miles away, is enraged.

Critics, including some within the tribe, call it environmental racism at its rawest.

Bear says it is the way to riches that will mean new homes, new jobs and better health care for the 118 members of his tribe. Only about two dozen — including children — still live on the 18,000-acre reservation, but this project will bring many of the others back, he predicts.

The Interior Department's Bureau of Indian Affairs approved the lease in 1997. The deal is yet to be consummated amid lawsuits, regulatory hurdles and bitter opposition. It's close, though.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission issued a license for the dump in February. The agency rejected arguments that the dump's location is unsafe because hundreds of F-16 jet fighters fly over the reservation on the way to bombing runs over nearby government land. The chance of a crash that could result in the release of radiation is one in a million, an adequate risk, the NRC said.

Private Fuel Storage LLC of Wisconsin, the consortium that would build and run the dump, has begun looking for nuclear power plant owners to sign up for waste shipments.

"We have to store this stuff somewhere," says the group's chairman, John Parkyn. The utilities "were promised this material would be collected and removed to a central location, and now we have one."

If Bear and Parkyn get their way, the project will mark a watershed in addressing the thorniest problem facing the nuclear industry: where to put nearly 60,000 tons of highly radioactive reactor waste now stored at power plants in 31 states, and the additional 2,000 tons being generated each year.

The government promised to take the waste beginning in 1998. But a planned federal site at Yucca Mountain in Nevada is years behind schedule. Some people say it may never be built.

The PFS consortium has spent more than \$20 million so far, including licensing costs and payments to the Skull Valley tribe under its 1997 lease.

Not a single utility has committed to send waste to Utah, and four of the companies that helped finance the project have said they will not commit any more money as long as Yucca Mountain moves forward.

If Yucca Mountain encounters more hurdles and delays, utilities will turn to Skull Valley, Parkyn predicted in an interview.