

## Yucca Mountain Update

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In 1982, Congress passed a law making the Department of Energy (DOE) responsible for the removal and storage of all radioactive waste generated by America's nuclear power plants. And yet, two and a half decades later, the federal government has yet to remove any of the waste, and the planned repository at Nevada's Yucca Mountain continues to be stuck in political limbo.

The result of the federal dithering: some 50,000 metric tons of spent radioactive fuel – to which we add 2,000 metric tons per year – is scattered across 39 states, at more than 100 plants that were never meant to store their own fuel. Plant operators are being forced to build more costly containment structures, which figures into new plant cost estimates. Meanwhile, legislation aimed at getting Yucca Mountain operational remains stalled in Congress.

Nuclear power plant operators say that the lack of movement on Yucca Mountain is costing them money. Pacific Gas and Electric, which owns California's Diablo Canyon Power Plant, is in the process of building a new containment structure there. The building, which would sit near the plant, is an addition PG&E hopes it won't have to use. But since Yucca Mountain has been stalled since 2002, there isn't much reason to assume that Diablo's nuclear waste will go anywhere but right next door. "We need to fix this, and soon," Thomas King, PG&E's CEO, said at an industry conference in May, referring to the country's nuclear waste storage problems.

There are similar troubles at Grand Gulf I, a 1,200-megawatt Entergy plant in Mississippi. The company has publicly admitted that, after 2007, it will no longer have the capacity to store waste. And while they still support the project, local residents are worried about the waste issue. "We still need to solve the problem of waste at these plants," said James E. Miller, the administrator of Claiborne County, which hosts the facility. "What will happen at Grand Gulf I?"

The waste-disposal woes are worrisome for utilities planning additional plants. Currently, 14 companies are considering building new nuclear plants, but cost estimates for these plants are sketchy at best, depending on factors like location, the cost of uranium, and the implementation of provisions in the 2005 Energy Policy Act. The potential costs of nuclear waste storage, and the possibility of building even more containment facilities, add yet another unknown factor that could deter would-be plant builders.