

Testimony of the Honorable Victoria Winfrey
President, Prairie Island Indian Community Tribal Council
Before the Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Nuclear Future
Subcommittee on Transportation and Storage
August 19, 2010

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Good morning, my name is Victoria Winfrey and I am the President of the Prairie Island Indian Community Tribal Council. We appreciate the opportunity to share some of our concerns with you today.

The operations of the Prairie Island Nuclear Generating Plant and its Independent Spent Fuel Storage Installation have direct, adverse health and environmental impacts on our Community.

The Prairie Island Indian Community is among the closest communities in the nation to a nuclear power plant and its above-ground nuclear waste storage site. The Prairie Island Nuclear Generating Plant's 26 large cement nuclear waste storage casks currently sit just 600 yards from our nearest residences. In addition, several homes, our clinic, our church, our elder center, our community center, and other community facilities are located within one mile of the plant's twin nuclear reactors. We are literally at the source of all plant releases and emissions. As a result, our members bear a disproportionate amount of the risks associated with plant operations and the on-site storage of nuclear waste.

Safety, health and environmental issues have been our major concerns since the plant went on-line in 1973. Those concerns include the impacts of long-term exposure to the plant's radiological emissions and the electromagnetic fields from the high voltage power lines that run directly across the road from our homes.

In addition to the on-site storage of high-level, radioactive nuclear waste in 26 dry casks along the floodplain of the Mississippi River, a number of incidents related to the operation of the plant have heightened our concerns, including:

- two unplanned radiological leaks at the plant, which is now among the oldest operating nuclear power plants in the United States;
- ongoing tritium leaks and contamination – tritium was originally detected in our residential wells in the late 1980s;
- recent Nuclear Regulatory Commission findings that criticized declining human performance at the plant;
- the steady and ever-increasing number of reported incidents and events at the plant, particularly the failure to identify and promptly address deficiencies that could impact multiple safety systems; and
- the repeated failure of the plant to provide appropriate notice to our Community of incidents or events when they are discovered or addressed.

The plant's performance history undermines our confidence in Xcel's ability to operate the plant safely and to store radioactive waste on-site for the operational life of the plant, let alone for 100 to 300 years. The plant and waste storage facility will continue to pose an unacceptable risk to our Community for decades – if not for centuries.

With all due respect, the fact that this Commission is meeting here today is testament to the federal government's history of broken promises to the Prairie Island Indian Community, and similarly impacted communities across the country. Twenty-eight years after Congress passed the Nuclear Waste Policy Act and mandated the establishment of a national repository, the future of the nation's nuclear waste disposal program remains very much in doubt. The contracts signed with electric utilities pursuant to the NWPA established a contractual deadline for the Department of Energy to start collecting waste by 1998. Another broken promise – the United States Government missed this deadline and breached its contracts. The national repository was then scheduled to begin accepting nuclear waste by 2010. Another broken promise – it's now unclear if a repository will ever be opened.

In addition, the NRC now proposes to amend its “waste confidence” decision yet again to provide that the waste can be safely stored on site for more than 100 years but less than 300 years without significant environmental impacts. The NRC would make this generic, multi-century extension of its “waste confidence” decision even though the long-term impacts of on-site storage on Prairie Island (or any other existing site) have never been evaluated. Another broken promise – the full environmental, health, security and economic consequences of long-term, on-site storage must be fully examined before even considering such an outrageous extension of what was supposed to be a short-term solution for nuclear waste.

So what do these broken promises mean to our Tribe? If the Prairie Island plant is relicensed for an additional 20 years as proposed, 69 new waste casks would be necessary, bringing the total number of casks at Prairie Island to 98 when the plant is decommissioned. These 98 casks would contain approximately 24 hundred tons of spent nuclear fuel that could potentially be stranded on Prairie Island until the year 2334! In other words, our Community is left with the horrible realization that the so-called “temporary” nuclear waste storage near our homes, clinic and other tribal facilities is where it will stay for generations.

To say that we are angry that we are now stuck with a nuclear waste dump as a neighbor is an understatement. What was supposed to be a 10 to 20 year “temporary” solution – and promise – is now a 100 to 300 year nightmare. Prairie Island is our only homeland, the land promised to us by the United States government. We cannot relocate to another place, somewhere away from a nuclear waste dump. No one asked us whether we wanted this waste abandoned next to our homeland for the next 300 years.

In inviting the Prairie Island Community to testify today, you asked us to address questions on the relationship between short-term, on-site storage and the long-term, never-ending search for a permanent national waste disposal facility. Quite frankly, Mr. Chairman, we – along with communities across the country – have grown weary of that dialog. Absent a scientific or technical explanation for why Yucca Mountain is no longer an option, we strongly believe that

Yucca Mountain remains the most viable and timely long-term nation nuclear waste storage strategy. Nevertheless, communities like ours are forced to live with the political reality that Yucca Mountain is being abandoned. Therefore, at a minimum, this Commission should initiate a national dialogue to evaluate whether centralized, away-from reactor storage is a feasible alternative to long-term on-site storage. We support the comments of Representative Timothy Walz, who in his letter to the Commission advocated for the development of one or more central, interim storage facilities. The Nuclear Waste Strategy Coalition, which is an ad hoc group of state utility regulators, state attorneys general, electric utilities and associate members representing 47 member/affiliate organizations in 31 states, including the Prairie Island Indian Community, also recommends that spent fuel and high-level radioactive waste be moved to a centralized, interim storage facility.

In conclusion, we believe the time has come for the United States to honor its promises, as well as its legal obligations, and move forward with the proven strategy of developing the Yucca Mountain site for permanent, long-term nuclear waste storage. Alternatively, the Commission should explore a centralized away-from reactor storage facility as an interim solution.

No other community in the country should have to live in fear of nuclear power and nuclear waste the way our Community does.

Thank you.