

[Comments Submitted by David Kraft, NEIS]

Key points I hope to address tomorrow:

Siting nuclear waste storage, especially long-term repositories, has been a classic NIMBY (“Not In My Back Yard”) failure. There is no broad political judgment that nuclear waste, especially existing waste, “should not be stored” (whatever that could mean), but a decision on where to put it continues to elude the US political process.

NIMBY’s are characterized by the disproportionate power of a numerically small interest group, usually neighbors of a geographic proposed site, compared to the power of a large population for whom the decision stakes are much smaller. Local opposition is usually based on fear of harm, and fear of fear...fear that (especially) future buyers of houses and property will be afraid to move near the controversial facility.

Traditional strategies to overcome NIMBY opposition include “muscling” opponents with force or the threat thereof, ramping up technical argument and science to show that the risk is much smaller than neighbors think, and economic promise of jobs and other benefits. Prisons, for example, are commonly welcomed in poor rural locations owing to their promise of high-paying secure employment.

Nuclear waste storage decisionmaking has also been high-centered on a seeming intransitivity of public preference, cycling between monitored retrievable storage we can get into and change if something goes wrong, and secure storage that no-one can get into even intentionally. The “10,000 year” security meme greatly complicates thinking about nuclear waste and interacts with local short-term NIMBY concerns. If a sign is erected at the site saying “don’t dig here! Very dangerous stuff!”, what material is the sign made of, and what language is it written in?

The success of at least some initially unpopular facilities (like prisons) suggests that taking local fears seriously and providing monetary compensation, negotiated with candidate communities, might help. Note that such payments are transfers if they exceed the ‘real’ costs neighbors incur, and do not impose an economic waste. However, pure compensation mechanisms must be accompanied by real political leadership recognizing that few are willing to think of themselves as willing to (say) “give our children cancer if you pay us enough” and also that in the right light, the opportunity to incur reasonable costs in the service of a larger community can be viewed as a duty or even a privilege.