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Yucca Mountain could become monument to shortsightedness



The nuclear energy industry — hiding behind the benign-sounding name of the U.S. Council for Energy Awareness — has launched a huge advertising campaign to convince the public that nuclear power is environmentally safe and that the United States desperately needs more nuclear power plants.

Adopting the slogan "Nuclear Energy Means Cleaner Air," nuclear energy companies are using an environmental angle to con us into believing nuclear energy is the best available alternative to fossil fuels. Emphasizing the problems of fossil fuels — urban smog, potential global warming and ozone depletion — the ads urge building more nuclear plants because they "don't burn anything."

A supposed environmental engineer in one ad says, "The U.S. already has 110 nuclear plants producing clean electricity with no air pollution. That's a precious environmental advantage for us, and even more, for future generations." This insidious advertisement promotes "clean" nuclear power without mentioning that we have not figured out how to dispose of the thousands of tons of highly radioactive and toxic waste that our "clean" U.S. nuclear plants generate every year.

Another ad displays a plan for a geological disposal site — a series of tunnels that store hazardous nuclear waste 1,000 feet beneath the ground. This particular advertisement implies

that such sites are open and ready for business.

An article, "Scandalous Waste," in a recent Sunday edition of the Tribune chronicled the problems plaguing the only site being considered as a depository for our nuclear waste — Yucca Mountain. Deep inside this mountain in Nevada, the Department of Energy, or DOE, hopes to employ a "deep geologic disposal method" to bury the radioactive waste generated by U.S. power plants.

Radioactive waste from power plants is long-lived and deadly. "Irradiated uranium fuel from commercial nuclear power plants is among the most dangerous of radioactive wastes," writes Nicholas Lenssen of the Worldwatch Institute. "It accounts for less than 1 percent of the volume of all radioactive wastes in the United States but for 95 percent of the radioactivity." Not only is this waste intensely radioactive, but it also remains radioactive for thousands of years.

As a nuclear waste disposal site, Yucca Mountain is problematic at best. For example, this "geologically stable site" was shaken last year by an earthquake registering 5.6 on the Richter scale — causing more than \$1 million in damage to energy department buildings on the site. This quake was a startling reminder that storing all of our high-level radioactive waste at one site creates the potential for an unimaginably devastating accident.

One concern is that an earthquake

might shift the water table and bring ground water into contact with the waste. There is no way to predict how geologically active the site will be in the future. Lenssen concludes, "Only a clairvoyant could choose a inviolable, permanent hiding place for the 20th century's nuclear legacy."

Despite these and other problems, DOE will probably bury our high-level radioactive waste in Yucca Mountain. Nuclear waste is the ultimate, "not in my back yard" material. So it is politically attractive to dump all the waste in one spot.

Without a safe method of waste disposal, any claims that nuclear energy is environmentally safe and sustainable are ludicrous. During the 1950s, the nuclear energy industry said its product would be "too cheap to meter" and lightly brushed aside the issue of radioactive waste disposal by saying it was a small technicality that would quickly be sorted out.

Almost 40 years later, we still don't know what to do with the 22,000 tons of radioactive waste that has piled up in the United States since our first power reactor went online in 1957. It is highly irresponsible of the nuclear industry to lobby for more power plants without having a safe and proven disposal method.

When Yucca Mountain is filled with its deadly burden, it will be a national monument to our shortsightedness — a monument that will endure 10,000 years.

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, care of the Columbia Daily Tribune, PO Box 798, Columbia, Mo., 65205.