

Public comments by Kevin Kamps, Beyond Nuclear, to Energy Secretary Chu's "Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Nuclear Future" at the Willard Hotel, Washington, DC

March 26, 2010

My name is Kevin Kamps, with Beyond Nuclear based in Takoma Park, Maryland.

I first became involved in high-level radioactive waste issues when the Palisades nuclear power plant in Covert, Michigan – near my lifelong home on the Lake Michigan shoreline – ran out of indoor pool storage space for irradiated nuclear fuel. In 1993, it began storing high-level radioactive waste in outdoor silos of concrete and steel a mere 100 yards from the water of Lake Michigan, the drinking water supply for 10 million people in Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin; further downstream, the Great Lakes supplies over 30 million Americans, Canadians, and Native American/First Nations with drinking water.

Palisades admitted a defective dry cask, with faulty welds, in June 1994. Despite assuring a federal judge, under oath, that any problems with casks would be solved by simply returning the wastes to the storage pool, that defective cask has sat on the beach for 16 years now, fully loaded with highly radioactive waste.

Also in 1994, U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) Midwest Region dry cask storage inspector, Dr. Ross Landsman, warned that the Palisades dry cask storage facility was in violation of NRC earthquake safety regulations. Specifically, he warned that fully loaded dry casks could be buried under sand by an earthquake, causing the radioactive waste within to overheat. Even worse, an earthquake could cause dry casks to sink to the bottom of Lake Michigan. Infiltrating water could spark a nuclear chain reaction in the fissile Uranium-235 and Plutonium-239 still present in the wastes, making emergency response a suicide mission given the high gamma radiation doses that would be emitted. Such an accident would be catastrophic for Lake Michigan and the Great Lakes as whole, yet nothing has been done in nearly two decades to address Dr. Landsman's concerns.

My experiences at Palisades – seeing firsthand how the dry cask storage was steamrolled into place, over public concern and state opposition – was quite a lesson about how NRC decisions get made.

At first glance, it would seem that this panel's name is inappropriate. For a panel that is supposed to address the lack of a solution to the high-level radioactive waste crisis, the name "Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Nuclear Future" seems a bit odd. But it may be ironically fitting, for forever deadly radioactive waste which has no solution **IS** the future of nuclear power in America, and around the world for that matter.

As Michael Keegan of the Coalition for a Nuclear-Free Great Lakes has put it, "Electricity is but the fleeting byproduct from atomic reactors. The actual product is forever deadly radioactive waste."

Forever deadly is no exaggeration. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, under court order, now recognizes a one million year hazard associated with high-level radioactive waste, at least in its applicable Yucca Mountain repository regulations. One million years equates to 40,000 human generations. A few generations of electricity, in exchange for 40,000 generations of radiological hazard, is quite a future for nuclear power, quite a burden for us to offload onto our descendants.

As Yucca Mountain, Nevada is Western Shoshone Indian land by the "peace and friendship" Treaty of Ruby Valley signed by the U.S. government in 1863, I'd like to thank President Obama and Energy Secretary Chu for the tremendous environmental justice victory the dumpsite's cancellation represents.

It also represents a tremendous environmental victory. Any radioactive waste that had been buried at Yucca would have leaked out, massively, over time, turning all points downstream into a nuclear sacrifice zone. The drinking water beneath Yucca serves a farming community downstream, as well as a National Wildlife Refuge, National Park, and the Timbisha Shoshone Indian Band. The dumpsite also could have cataclysmically failed in an earthquake or even volcanic eruption at that seismically active area. No wonder, then, that over 1,000 national and grassroots environmental groups opposed the dump at Yucca Mountain, and are now relieved and thankful that President Obama and Energy Secretary Chu have cancelled the dumpsite and the thousands of high-level radioactive waste trucks, trains, and barges that would have carried the wastes through most states bound for Nevada.

I would also like to thank President Obama for recognizing Grace Thorpe on March 3, 2009 in his "Women Taking the Lead to Save our Planet" Women's History Month 2009 Proclamation. President Obama proclaimed:

"Grace Thorpe, another leading environmental advocate, also connected environmental protection with human well-being by emphasizing the vulnerability of certain populations to environmental hazards. In 1992, she launched a successful campaign to organize Native Americans to oppose the storage of nuclear waste on their reservations, which she said contradicted Native American principles of stewardship of the earth. She also proposed that America invest in alternative energy sources such as hydroelectricity, solar power, and wind power."

Grace Thorpe, who passed away a few years ago now, was a Sauk and Fox as well as Pokagon Potawatomi Indian best known for restoring her father's -- "Athlete of the Century" Jim Thorpe's -- Olympic gold medals to the Thorpe family.

But she also led the effort on her Sauk and Fox Reservation in Oklahoma to immediately put a stop to any consideration that her community become an "interim" parking lot dump for commercial high-level radioactive waste. She then went on the road, and helped stop such environmentally racist targeting of dozens more Native American tribes by the U.S. Department of Energy's "Nuclear Waste Negotiator." She was instrumental in seeing that the Nuclear Waste Negotiator program was de-funded and done away with in 1992, five years after it came into existence.

But in that time, the Nuclear Waste Negotiator gave “federally recognized” Indian tribe a whole new meaning. It seems the federal government “recognized” that politically and economically vulnerable Native American reservation communities could serve as the “path of least resistance” for parking high-level radioactive wastes with nowhere else to go for decades, or perhaps even forever. Every single federally recognized tribe in the country received a solicitation letter from the DOE’s Nuclear Waste Negotiator. Sixty tribal chairmen or councils, in their economic desperation, expressed interest.

But traditionals and environmentalists within those targeted tribal communities worked with Grace and others to put a stop to the radioactive racism. Rufina Marie Laws and Joe Geronimo at Mescalero Apache, New Mexico, led efforts to defend their community – one of the first “Downwinder” communities in the world, as it is immediately downwind of the Alamogordo site where the “Trinity” plutonium bomb was tested on July 16, 1945. First the Nuclear Waste Negotiator’s federal “monitored retrievable storage” site was defeated. Later, a private industry attempt to do what the federal government was unable to at Mescalero was likewise defeated.

But undaunted and shameless, the nuclear power industry’s “Private Fuel Storage, Limited Liability Corporation” picked up where it had left off at Mescalero, and attempted to force its parking lot dump on the tiny Skull Valley Goshute Indian Reservation in Utah. Margene Bullcreek and Sammy Blackbear put a stop to it.

These bitter struggles lasted many long years, leaving wounds in these communities that will take a very long time to heal, even though no radioactive waste was ever delivered to either Mescalero or Skull Valley. The anti-dump tribal members suffered severe harassment and even death threats for their courageous stand.

Winona LaDuke of Honor the Earth, an Ojibwe environmental leader from the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota, has helped lead the national effort to stop radioactive waste dumps targeted at Indian lands. She has said “The best minds in nuclear science have been hard at work for over 50 years to figure out a solution to the radioactive waste problem, and now they’ve finally got it – haul it down a dirt road and dump it on an Indian reservation.”

Tom Goldtooth of Indigenous Environmental Network, another leader against radioactive waste dumps on Native lands, reminds us that environmental justice principles must be at the forefront of decision making in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Joe Campbell at the Prairie Island Indian Community in Minnesota also deserves praise, for opposing the generation of high-level radioactive waste at the Prairie Island Nuclear Power Plant. Incredibly, the dry cask storage facility there, in the floodplain of the Mississippi River, is located a mere 600 yards from the tribal day care center and the nearest tribal residences.

At this time when the Yucca Mountain dumpsite proposal has been so wisely cancelled by President Obama and Energy Secretary Chu, I would also like to honor the Western Shoshone National Council for its tireless vigilance against the dump, as well as against nuclear weapons testing at the Nevada Test Site. Corbin Harney, Western Shoshone spiritual leader, founder of the Shundahai Network, passed

away in 2007. For decades, he led and inspired the grassroots resistance to the dump and nuclear weapons testing. Other Western Shoshone leaders are fortunately still with us, including Ian Zabarte, Secretary of State of the Western Shoshone National Council, who for 25 years, in an unpaid voluntary capacity, has served as a legal and technical policy coordinator in the Western Shoshone Nation's vigilant resistance against the Yucca Mountain dumpsite proposal.

I urgently call upon this Blue Ribbon Commission to put a stop, once and for all, to the shameful history of targeting Native American communities and lands with radioactive waste dumps.

Thank you.