



News release

For Immediate release – March 6, 2009

Contacts: Diane D'Arrigo 301-270-6477 x16 Nuclear Information and Resource Service (NIRS)
Karen Hadden 512-797-8481 SEED Coalition
Cyrus Reed 512-740-4086 Lone Star Sierra Club

Radioactive Risks for West Texas

Odessa, Texas – Texas environmental organizations hosted speaker Diane D'Arrigo, Radioactive Waste Project Director for the Nuclear Information and Resource Service (NIRS) at a press conference today. She discussed the risks posed to Texans living near the so-called "low-level" radioactive waste dump in Andrews County.

"Low-level radioactive waste could remain dangerous for hundreds of thousands to over a million years," said D'Arrigo. "Texas' waste dump in Andrews County calls for a private company to manage a low-level dump, but the company would only be licensed to operate it for 15 years. They could then renew their license or decide to close the dump and walk away, leaving a toxic mess to the state of Texas. This could also happen if the company just folds up and vanishes into the night."

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) approved the Waste Control Specialists (WCS) permit for the Andrews County radioactive waste dump January 14th of this year. Twenty-six additional nuclear reactors are currently seeking licenses in the U.S., eight of them for Texas, and so the nuclear industry will want to dump radioactive waste from numerous sites on West Texas.

"Citizens are demanding that the state environmental agency allow a contested case hearing to address the many problems the radioactive dump would create," said Karen Hadden, Director of the Sustainable Energy and Economic Development (SEED) Coalition. "Technical experts at the TCEQ raised concerns that the application was incomplete and that it failed to protect two aquifers from radioactive waste, but the permit was granted anyway, and the citizen request for a hearing was denied. Legal action to fix the problem is needed now."

"TCEQ rushed into a risky deal by approving a faulty application to dispose of some of the most dangerous radioactive waste known," said Cyrus Reed, Conservation Director of Lone Star Sierra Club. "And they've done it without giving members of the public who are at risk a chance to prove that the application is faulty. That's why we're appealing to the State District Court, asking that a hearing be required."

"Andrews County is poised to become the nation's largest and perhaps one of the most deadly radioactive and hazardous waste dumps, mainly for nuclear power and weapons waste. The burial of waste threatens

the water, air, roads and rails, and opens the door to importing waste from across the country and the world,” said D’Arrigo. “This is despite promises that the dump would only take waste from Texas and Vermont. Proposed new nuclear power reactors throughout the US are now banking on dumping here.”

The region stands to become a major radioactive and toxic corridor--with a nuclear waste dump in New Mexico (WIPP) on one end, the Waste Control Specialists radioactive waste dump on the other, and the Louisiana Energy Services (LES) uranium enrichment plant next door, none of which is guaranteed to actually bring prosperity, but all guaranteed to bring long lasting threats to health and resources.

“The radionuclides at the Waste Control Specialists site will never stay isolated from the Ogallala and Dockum aquifers for the hundreds of thousands to millions of years that some of them remain dangerous. Uranium is hazardous from the minute it is mined from the earth but becomes more dangerous when it is put into reactor cores or nuclear weapons. New radioactive materials are formed in nuclear reactors, some very long-lasting and mobile, able to leak out and move underground,” said D’Arrigo.

Over 96% of Texas’s “low-level” radioactive waste comes from the two commercial nuclear reactor sites in Texas.

Low-level radioactive waste is defined as everything radioactive in a nuclear power plant except the high-level reactor fuel core. This includes pipes that carry radioactive water, filters and sludge from the water in the reactor and even the entire reactor itself when it is dismantled – thousands of tons of contaminated concrete and steel. None of the radioactive elements in high-level waste is prohibited from inclusion in low-level waste. In fact, not a single radionuclide is barred from being dumped at the West Texas site.

Taking Action:

“We’re calling on the legislature to close the loophole in the Compact Waste agreement that allows any state to dump radioactive waste on Texas,” said Hadden. “Citizens will be calling and writing their state senator and representative to urge quick action to protect Texas.” One of the aquifers at risk for radioactive contamination is the Ogallala Aquifer, which underlies eight states, many of which are in wheat growing regions, the breadbasket of the nation.

Citizens are also demanding that the TCEQ reconsider their decision to deny a contested case hearing on this extremely important issue.

D’Arrigo will speak in the evening at 6 PM at Big Daddy’s Grill and Bar in Odessa. She will be joined by Dr. Terry Burns, with the Permian Basin Sierra Club, who will discuss health concerns, Rose Gardner – a concerned citizen from Eunice, New Mexico, the city nearest the radioactive waste dump, and SEED Coalition Director, Karen Hadden.

###