Candidates waffle on nuclear energy issue

by The Detroit News

The major candidates for president are missing an opportunity to promote nuclear energy, a sure way to meet a growing U.S. demand for power with minimal environmental impact.

Candidates campaigning this month in Nevada waffled or opposed burying radioactive waste under Yucca Mountain, part of a remote stretch of desert 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

Yucca and nuclear energy are keys to a comprehensive national energy strategy, and opposition to using the mountain is misplaced. Nuclear plants are one of the best ways to generate more electrical power without significantly increasing greenhouse gases. In turn, Yucca is the best place to store spent nuclear fuel - a determination made after 20 years of scientific study.

About 45,000 tons of spent fuel is stored at more than 100 sites around the country - including a number in Michigan. More than 161 million Americans live within 75 miles of one of these sites. The current storage is safe but considered temporary. And there are good reasons to transport the cooled-down nuclear materials to a permanent site at Yucca.

For one thing, the mountain is remote and relatively dry, minimizing the risk of contaminating ground water. The nearest permanent home to the mountain is 14 miles out in the desert. And since Sept. 11, Yucca is especially desirable in terms of national security.

The bulk of radioactive waste would be buried deep underground. And having one major repository reduces security risks. Nuclear power plants are already a major part of the power grid. In 2006, they generated about 25 percent of the electricity in Michigan and about 20 percent nationally.

On the record, transporting the accumulated waste to Nevada isn't particularly risky. Of 300 million annual shipments of hazardous materials in the United States, about 3 million (1 percent) are radioactive, according the U.S. Department of Energy. The shipments to Yucca will add an estimated 175 more hazardous-material trips to the 300 million - barely a speck.

Since the 1960s, some 2,700 shipments of nuclear fuel have traveled more than 1.6 million miles without harmful release of radioactive material, the agency said. The fuel is neither explosive nor flammable and is transported in specially designed cases.

But you won't hear such details from many of the presidential hopefuls. While campaigning in Nevada, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and John Edwards opposed using Yucca Mountain but none of the three detailed an alternative plan. On the GOP side, most candidates straddle the Yucca fence with the exception of John McCain, report Nevada newspapers that follow Yucca pronouncements closely.

McCain has it right. Nuclear energy is an integral part of the energy mix. Securing the spent fuel in a single secure location would take care of the current storage problem and allow the nuclear industry to grow to meet future energy needs

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