

White House Approves Plan to Fire Reactors into Space

Twelve days after the experimental nuclear reactor-propelled rocket exploded in Russia killing eight scientists, and with funeral services for the dead barely complete, President Trump signed a White House memorandum supporting the rocketing of US nuclear reactors into outer space. Trump's Aug. 20 memo gives NASA managers "180 days to create an Interagency Nuclear Safety Review Board to ensure the safety of launching radioisotope power systems, fission reactors used for power and propulsion and more," the *New York Post* reported. "The federal government and private companies have been eyeing nuclear-powered space exploration and nuclear reactors to fuel missions to the moon, Mars and beyond," the *Post* reported.

NASA Administrator Jim Bridenstine bubbled with enthusiasm at an August meeting of the National Space Council, saying his scientists could harness the heat from nuclear reactors to accelerate propellants to tremendous speeds.

Rex Geveden, president and CEO of BWX Technologies, claimed that a reactor-powered rocket could cut in half the travel time needed to reach Mars. Geveden said at the Space Council meeting, "If we are to fulfill these objectives to establish a long-term presence on the moon and to send the first crewed mission to Mars, nuclear power is arguably the most important to enable these bold goals." BWX Technologies sells reactor parts and reactor fuel to the government and the nuclear industry. NASA's Bridenstine said nuclear-powered propulsion "gives us an opportunity to really protect life when we talk about the radiation dose when we travel between earth and Mars," the *Houston Chronicle* reported. —*New York Post*; www.space.com; and *Houston Chronicle*; Aug. 20, 2019

National Grassroots Activist Summit on Radioactive Waste

Albuquerque, New Mexico
~November 8-10~

This is a gathering for activists, grassroots community organizers, and impacted community folks who are dealing with issues created by the nuclear fuel chain, specifically regarding: Decommissioning, Consolidated Interim Storage, Yucca Mountain, and Small Modular [nuclear] Reactors. We, the organizers of 2019 Summit, welcome international, national and local allies and friends from the Albuquerque area and surrounding Southwest. This is not a pro-nuclear gathering.

The Summit will take place near Albuquerque, New Mexico, Fri., Nov. 8, at 7 p.m. to Sun., Nov. 10 at 3 p.m. There will be optional activities (tours of nuclear sites) on Fri., Nov. 8, and Mon., Nov. 11.

This is a collaborative effort coordinated, organized, and funded by several groups and individuals across the country.

Registration questions can be directed to Dave Kraft or Leona Morgan: Dave: neis@neis.org and 773-342-7650 (voice only); Leona: [activistsummit@gmail.com] and 505-879-8547 (call or text).

Radioactive Particles Possibly Migrating from California's Woolsey Fire

Last November, the Woolsey Fire near Los Angeles, California caused three immediate deaths and concern nationwide—from West Coast residents including the Kardashians to the East Coast nonprofit organization Fairewinds Energy Education.

What's worrisome is the potential re-suspension and dispersal of radioactive contamination from the Santa Susana Field Laboratory (SSFL), a Superfund site where the fire began. A partial meltdown of the Sodium Reactor Experiment at SSFL—which was the first nuclear reactor meltdown in the US and cause of the fourth largest release of radioactive iodine-131 in the history of nuclear power—occurred in 1959 and was kept secret for two decades. See the cover story in the Winter 2018-19 *Nukewatch Quarterly*.

Responding to public alarm, both the US Department of Energy and the California Dept. of Toxic Sub-



Billboard in Syracuse, New York, near the Reaper drone base Hancock Field.

Secret, Mislabeled Radioactive Waste Shipment Discredits Department of Energy

By Kelly Lundeen

In early July, the US Department of Energy astonished Nevada when it divulged that for six years it had been sending mixed-level radioactive waste labeled as low-level to the Nevada National Security Site (formerly the Nevada Test Site). Nine shipments of 32 containers each were transported without proper labelling and stored at the Site without adhering to the minimal legal requirements for protective handling. The Nevada National Security Site has been designated as a permanent disposal site for low-level radioactive waste, for example rags, construction debris and other materials exposed to radioactivity as well as mixed-level radioactive waste like radioactive garbage and sludge, as long as it is in compliance with the security site's waste acceptance criteria. The waste received was out of compliance.

This follows the recent revelation that the DOE secretly sent weapons-grade plutonium to the site last year without informing government entities or tribes. Leaders of 13 tribes and the governors of Nevada and New Mexico have publicly shown opposition to these shipments. In a letter to DOE Secretary Perry tribal chair of the Las Vegas Paiute Tribe, Chris Spotted Eagle wrote, "As a Southern Nevada tribe, our reservations—one in downtown Las Vegas and another in the northwestern part of the Las Vegas Valley—are in direct proximity to the transportation routes that may have been utilized for this shipment to the Nevada National Security Site."

A coalition of nine southwest grass roots organizations including Healthy Environment Alliance of Utah, Uranium Watch, the Utah Sierra Club, Utah Physicians for a Healthy Environment and others is now putting pressure on Utah governor Gary Herbert to take a lesson from tribal and Nevada and New Mexico state leaders to express concern over radioactive shipments. Nestled between the three proposed radioactive waste sites of Yucca Mountain, Holtec in New Mexico and WCS in Texas, Utah

would be along a transportation route for most of the nation's 70,000 tons of high-level radioactive waste to reach any of these destinations if one of them is ever chosen as a storage site.

In a letter to Governor Herbert, the organizations asked that he, "(1) object to the use of Utah roads and rails to ship mischaracterized radioactive wastes that are not legal to store or dispose of at facilities in Nevada or elsewhere, and (2) oppose consolidated interim storage of [radioactive] spent nuclear fuel in Utah and in any State that objects to such a facility." Utah residents can ask the governor to speak out at www.healutah.org/actionalert/. In essence, they would like the governor to ask the DOE to follow the law.

Following the six years of mishandling mixed-level radioactive waste, the DOE said it would temporarily halt shipments and launch an internal investigation. At the heart of the issue is the credibility of the Department of Energy. In the case of the 2018 plutonium shipment, there was an enormous quantity of highly radioactive plutonium knowingly sent across at least seven states without alerting residents or first responders along transportation routes.

On March 20 this year, US Senator Catherine Cortez Masto of Nevada announced that DOE Secretary Rick Perry had "promised to give her a firm time line as to when the weapons-grade plutonium that was secretly shipped into Nevada last year will leave the state," according to the *Las Vegas Review Journal*. However in August a three-judge panel of the 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals not only denied the state's request to remove the plutonium, but also dismissed the appeal for a ban on new shipments of highly radioactive plutonium. The Nevada Attorney General Aaron Ford will seek a new court order for its removal.

—*Mineral County Independent-News*, Aug. 22; *Washington Post*, Aug. 16; Healthy Environment Alliance of Utah, July 29; Native News Online, Mar. 27, 2019

stances Control initially assured the public that the 2018 Woolsey Fire had not affected the contaminated areas, that no radioactivity was released, and that there was no threat to nearby communities. When satellite photographs revealed the contrary, both agencies were forced to walk back their statements.

Following reactor meltdowns in Chernobyl (1986) and Fukushima (2011), nearby wildfires have repeatedly re-suspended radioactive materials that were spewed, dispersed and deposited on surrounding territory. To ascertain where radioactively contaminated micro particles of dust and dirt may have migrated—in the winds that drove the Santa Susana fire all the way to Malibu Beach—Fairewinds Energy Education and Physicians for Social Responsibility-Los Angeles (PSR-LA) have embarked on an independent sampling project. Fairewinds developed protocols for a "citizen sci-

ence" program along with Dr. Marco Kaltofen, a radioactive dust expert and professor at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, a private research university in Worcester, Mass. PSR-LA instructed area citizens in gathering more than 400 dust and soil samples following the fire, making this study statistically meaningful. Due to the high cost of the five-stage process using Geiger counters, liquid scintillation detectors, and scanning electron microscopes, only 20 of the first batch of 100 samples are currently at the laboratory. Learn more about the ongoing program at www.fairewinds.org/woolsey-fire-blog.

—Kelly Lundeen and Maggie Gundersen

—M. Gunderson, Fairewinds Energy Education, Sept. 2019; Gar Smith, *Nuclear Roulette*, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2012, p. 63.