New Mexico Bans & NRC Approves
Radioactive Waste Facility

New Mexico continues the fight to avoid becoming the nation’s radioactive dumping ground. The legislation that would prohibit the construction of an interim or permanent waste site without the state’s consent. Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham signed it into law March 17, the moment it hit her desk, and it officially went into effect June 15. Under the statute, the federal government must have a plan for permanent disposal, and the state must have a facility capable of accepting any waste. Six public hearings were held before any interim waste facilities break ground. Meanwhile, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has notified Holtec International of its approval of the firm’s plan to build a consolidated interim storage facility (CISF) for 8,680 metric tons of high-level radioactive waste in New Mexico. While a wide range of groups, tribes and lawmakers continue working against the project, others are strongly in support of it. Some elected officials in the New Mexico counties where the Holtec CISF would reside, agreed to the plan.

Radiation safety

LANL’s contractor, Triad National Security, was not fined for the violations and no corrective actions have been required before a planned increase in plutonium “pit” production is to begin, which will require greater use of the glove boxes. The public will not have a chance for direct comment on new pit production during LANL’s environmental analysis, according to Jay Coghlan, executive director of New Mexico Watch. Greg Mello, of Los Alamos Study Group, reports the National Nuclear Security Administration is pushing Triad to be safe while ramping up production to 30 pits a year for warheads, saying, “It’s difficult to do both.” — Santa Fe New Mexican, June 2 & May 17, 2023

War Resisters Intercept Construction Work at Büchel Airbase, Germany

On May 8, the anniversary of the surrender of Nazi Germany in 1945, eight war resisters entered the NATO airbase Büchel, south of Cologne, where the United States stations up to 20 of its thermonuclear gravity bombs. Trespass charges could result. The eight said they intended to interfere with construction work being done on the base’s runway for the delivery of new H-bombs from the United States. Sometime next year, new “B61-12” thermonuclear weapons are scheduled to replace the B61s currently stationed on the base. The participants, aged between 43 and 75 and from all over Germany, demanded an end to Büchel’s nuclear attack readiness — made explicit in NATO’s June 2022 “Strategic Concept,” which they point out violates the UN Charter and other international treaties. “Germany’s ‘nuclear sharing’ violates the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and the human right to life,” said Miriam Menzel-Krämer, 58, from Aalen. “The risk of a nuclear war is already extremely high. Nuclear armament further aggravates the tensions in connection with the war in Ukraine and fuels the nuclear arms race.” Europe, 73, a musician from Herford. — Büchel is Everywhere: Nuclear Weapons-Free Now!, May 8, 2023

Empty Rad Waste Train Derails in Vermont

A recent train derailment once again highlights the risk of transporting radioactive waste. On February 9, a train carrying radioactive waste from the now-decommissioned Vermont Yankee nuclear reactor in Vernon, Vermont derailed. A spokesperson for NorthStar Group Services, the company responsible for the transportation of the material told the Battleboro Reformer, “The train was not carrying any NorthStar material at the time of the derailment, no one was injured, no property was damaged as a result, and the derailed train cars remained upright.” The Vermont Yankee reactor has been in the decommissioning process since 2019 and has since been transporting highly radioactive fuel rods thousands of miles, via NorthStar, to the Andrews County, Texas, Waste Control Specialists dumping site, the presumptive destination of the recently derailed empty train cars. This incident comes only a few weeks after a train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio that caused the release of several hazardous materials, a two-day fire, and evacuation of the local community. One can only speculate how a similar derailment of train cars carrying the waste would unfold. — Beyond Nuclear, March 2; Brattleboro Reformer, March 1, 2023

Los Alamos Radioactive Breaches

The U.S. Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board has reported five “glove box breaches” at the Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) between January and March 2023, which exposed personnel to hazardous radioactivity. The glove boxes are sealed compartments that allow workers to handle plutonium by placing their hands into lead-lined gloves built into the boxes. Breaches happen often at LANL. There were three recorded over the course of one month last year. Though the April report denies resulting contamination, a January 2022 event caused air contamination double the “yearly limit” permitted in the workplace, said a worker, one of two workers, one of whom required chelation treatment to remove heavy metals from the body. The following month, a worker’s face was covered in a substance identified as a result of a damaged glove. In 2021, a breached glove box contaminated three workers, and a plutonium container vault splattered 1,800 gallons of radioactive water. In a second breach, water ran through an air vent and into a glove box on a lower floor. In June 2020, one glove box leak contaminated 14 workers.

From left: Inga Blum, Ernst-Ludwig Isenbein, Ria Makein, Johannes Wilhboad, Gerd Bünzly, Miriam Menzel-Krämer, Lies Welker, and Christiane Danowski, near their “go-in” action Germany’s at Büchel airbase. The banner reads “8 May - Nonviolence Against Nuclear Weapons.” There are U.S. H-bombs on base.

Rad Waste Dump Decisions: Consent or Bribery?

On June 9, the United States Department of Energy named 13 consortia, each to receive $2 million in federal taxpayer funding, to help push the DOE’s so-called “consent-based siting” of a consolidated interim storage facility (CISF) for highly radioactive waste. The funding will be directed to “groups of universities, non-profits, and communities” that will help communities decide that they want to be the recipients of the country’s waste repository. Having abjectly failed to find any safe, long-term radioactive waste management “solution,” it is possible because there is none — while also failing to halt the production of radioactive waste, the DOE has now moved to what it calls “consent-based siting.” Ironically, Holtec is the “lead” of one "project team" funded by the DOE, even though the company is trying to force a private CISF on New Mexico, despite the fact that the DOE has a lack of support for the state. Given the three tribal affiliated groups, and three Indigenous Nations, being funded as consortia members, it would be difficult for one group to accept any of the American communities once again, as it did in the late 1980s and early 1990s. If past examples are any indicator, the “consenting” communities are likely to be those most impacted by highly radioactive communities and communities of color, who may feel pressured to accept the DOE largesse along with the deadly hazards of living alongside high-level radioactive waste. — Beyond Nuclear, June 11, 2023

Poison Power Means Dirty Politics

In a testament to the astronomical costs of new nuclear reactors, executives and public officials faced criminal charges recently in two conspiracy schemes that funneled billions of taxpayer dollars to failed or failing reactor projects. Stephen Form, former executive vice president of SCANA Corp., the utility behind the abandoned V.C. Summer expansion, will serve 15 months in prison for defrauding taxpayers, while former CEO of Dominion Resources, two years. The SCANA plan to add two Westinghouse reactors cost more than $9 billion and never generated a single kilowatt of power. Two Westinghouse executives, Carl Church and Jeff Benjamin, are facing prison. Churchman pleaded guilty to perjury, and Benjamin will stand trial in October for 16 felony charges carrying a possible $5 million fine. Meanwhile in Ohio, former Republican House Speaker Larry Householder and former Republican Party Chair Matt Hermes were convicted in March for accepting $60 million in bribes to push HB 6, a billion-dollar bailout for two reactors operated by First Energy Corp. The two intend to appeal. First Energy spent $30 million over two years. The SCANA plan to add two Westinghouse reactors cost more than $9 billion and never generated a single kilowatt of power. Two Westinghouse executives, Carl Church and Jeff Benjamin, are facing prison. Churchman pleaded guilty to perjury, and Benjamin will stand trial in October for 16 felony charges carrying a possible $5 million fine. Meanwhile in Ohio, former Republican House Speaker Larry Householder and former Republican Party Chair Matt Hermes were convicted in March for accepting $60 million in bribes to push HB 6, a billion-dollar bailout for two reactors operated by First Energy Corp. The two intend to appeal. — AP, Marshall 8, 2023; Reuters, Aug. 20, 2021; Bloomberg News, July 23, 2023

Ukraine: Cooling Pond at Reactor Site at Risk

The cooling pond at the six-reactor Zaporizhzhia nuclear power complex in Ukraine is in danger of collapse as a result of the destruction of the Khokvadam and the draining of its reservoir, according to the French Institute for Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety (IRSN). Without the reservoir on the other side to counteract it, the internal pressure of the water in the waste fuel cooling pool could break the dyke around it, the IRSN said in a June 7 report. Officials at Ukraine’s Energyatom corporation, replied that any collapse of the dike would be partial “even in a worst-case,” and that there would still be sufficient cooling of the six reactor cores and the waste fuel cool. Since the collapse of the Khokvadam on June 6, its reservoir has been draining into the Dnipro River, has lost power to its cooling system and had an expected to drop below the water intakes used to pump water into ponds used to cool the reactors, the waste fuel rods, and other equipment, the site. The Zaporizhzhia reactors have been shut down for the past eight months, but fuel inside reactors and in the cooling ponds still requires cooling. — Reuters, June 12; The Guardian, June 8, 2023

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