

Reject Shameful Nuclear Dumping on Reservations

By Kevin Kamps

Standing between the Stansbury and Cedar Mountains in the middle of Skull Valley, Utah, outsiders might be tempted to see only a desolate wasteland. If so, then they don't know how to be still and listen, Margene Bullcreek would say, a woman who has spent all her life appreciating the peace, tranquility, and sacredness of her Native Goshute land. The reservation is where Bullcreek has cut willow branches to cradle her babies as her mother and grandmother did before her. It is a place where her ancestors' bones are buried. And it is the only land she and her tribe have left after the U.S. government appropriated the country from its first people.

Now, the Skull Valley Goshutes, some of whom still speak their traditional language, face the final insult to what little they can still hold dear. The two dozen reservation inhabitants have been offered the smallpox blanket equivalent of the Atomic Age. A private consortium of seven electric utilities known as Private Fuel Storage (PFS) wants to dump what amounts to 80% of the current high-level radioactive waste inventory of the country's 103 commercial nuclear reactors onto Bullcreek's reservation.

To get the deal done, PFS dangled an enticing price tag, rumored to be as much as tens of millions of dollars, in front of the tribe. Without his members' consent, disputed tribal chairman Leon Bear accepted the deal. He is currently under federal indictment for allegedly pocketing most of the money and refusing to share it with any tribal members who oppose the dump. Indeed, several opponents have alleged being harassed, intimidated, even shot at.

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) has already rejected scores of contentions including appeals from tribal members and the State of Utah. Any day now, the NRC Commissioners will decide whether to award the final license to PFS. The agency has dismissed claims of environmental racism, citing the huge payoff the tribe is supposed to reap. Tribal opponents are arguing this contention since, apart from the reality that few will likely see the money at all, it sets an alarming precedent. The message NRC is sending is that federal agencies would henceforth be justified in licensing toxic dumps in impoverished communities provided the polluting corporation "compensates" the victims financially.

As much as 44,000 tons of high-level radioactive waste is targeted at Skull Valley, a plan that would launch an unprecedented 4,000 shipments by train – 200 shipments per year for 20 years rolling past millions of homes across America. The casks holding the waste have never undergone full-scale testing and could be shipped on the same trains

as flammables and explosives, a potentially catastrophic risk should the train meet with a severe accident or attack. Each cask contains more than 200 times the long-lasting radioactivity released by the Hiroshima atomic bomb. Upon arrival, the casks would sit side by side in plain view on the reservation, just 45 miles upwind from Salt Lake City.

Even more alarmingly, the country's most active bombing range – the Utah Test and Training Range – where crashes and misfires have occurred as recently as last September – is located right next door. Just last month, however, NRC chairman Nils Diaz casually downplayed such dangers, stating that even if a jet fighter crashed into the facility, radiation leakage would not extend beyond two miles. But of course, that is exactly where Margene Bullcreek and other Skull Valley Goshutes live.

PFS is ear-marked for “interim” storage while the designated permanent site at Yucca Mountain, Nevada continues to face scrutiny for scientific flaws and data falsification as well as law suits from the State of Nevada, which vehemently opposes it. Neither dump, nor the unimaginable risks associated with transporting the waste, would solve anything: irradiated fuel will continue to be stored on site where it is generated for many decades to come, so long as reactors keep operating. Instead, in authorizing the Utah dump, the NRC and federal government would be plunging the country back into its ugly pattern of victimization of indigenous peoples, pitting family against family as the tempting panacea of instant riches is dangled before one of the most destitute communities in the country.

In the 1950s, the U.S. government decided to open its nuclear weapons testing site upwind of Utah because it regarded the Mormons and Native Americans there as a “low-use segment of the population.” Nuclear utilities apparently view Margene Bullcreek's reservation the same way. It would be hard to find a community more economically and politically vulnerable than the Skull Valley Goshutes. That of course is precisely why they have been targeted. And it is precisely why this shameful practice should be rejected.