

## A High Level Nuclear Waste Site in Buncombe County? Not So Impossible

President Obama called for a clean energy future in his State of the Union speech that included the development of wind, solar, clean coal, and nuclear energy. He has created a Blue Ribbon Commission to study the energy future of nuclear power in the United States. This commission is conducting public hearings nationwide until March 1, 2011 and then presenting a report of recommendations to the White House on July 1, 2011. A Commission hearing in Augusta, GA in January was attended by a busload of thirty four concerned citizens of Western North Carolina. Reasons for concern were twofold.

First, there is a proposal to make the Savannah River nuclear site a major reprocessing center for nuclear waste in the United States in what would be called the Savannah River "Energy Park". South Carolina businesses want this federally funded nuclear economy and already have community college training programs to support the reprocessing industry. Nuclear waste would be transported from nuclear power plants in the northern and western United States via I-26 and I-40 through Asheville to South Carolina for reprocessing and then transported again to a high level nuclear waste storage facility.

The second cause for concern for the citizens attending the Blue Ribbon Commission hearing is that Sandy Mush Valley in Buncombe County is a possible location for that high level nuclear waste site based on past history and close proximity to the nuclear fuel reprocessing center in South Carolina. The Department of Energy conducted extensive surveys of potential high level nuclear waste sites in the 1970s and 1980s and found Sandy Mush to be one of the twelve optimum sites on the east coast due to the high concentration of crystalline granite in the valley. Of the sites singled out, Sandy Mush is the closest to South Carolina making it an even more favorable high level nuclear waste storage repository. Transporting nuclear waste is risky and distance is a primary factor in assessing safety. A later 1988 study by the North Carolina Geological Survey found Sandy Mush to be unsuitable as a nuclear waste disposal site, yet no subsequent studies have suggested better alternatives.

Some of the attendees at the hearing were members of the Western North Carolina Chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility. They maintain along with their national chapter that the best place to store nuclear waste for the time being is on site at the nuclear power plant. This storage method results in the least possibility of contamination due to transportation accidents, additional sites to contaminate, and security risks of hijacking of the fuel. With ongoing research and development, new technologies will appear to better deal with high level nuclear waste disposal. Currently no waste disposal methods have been safe and effective.

These mountains we call home have an allure that brings millions of people here every year. Tourism is our dominant industry as the area continues to attract a population seeking the beauty of nature and environmental awareness that makes the area a mecca for outdoor activity. Shipments of high level nuclear waste traveling in large containers on flatbed trucks through our communities is an accident waiting to happen. A high level nuclear waste facility in Buncombe County would threaten the economic stability of the area and, equally, our quality of life.

For more information or to get involved go to:

Nuclear Information and Resource Service- [www.nirs.org/southeast/sehome.htm](http://www.nirs.org/southeast/sehome.htm)

Physicians for Social Responsibility- [www.wncpsr.org](http://www.wncpsr.org)