

EDITORIAL PAGE

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September/October 1976

Radioactive Wastes and our Future

by

Larry J. Gordon, M.S., M.P.H., Assistant Editor
and Theodore A. Wolff, Ph.D.

Land disposal of radioactive wastes is truly "a problem of centuries." Full exploitation of nuclear energy will result in an astronomical amount of radioactive waste, and unless proper disposal methods are developed, potential public health hazards associated with radioactive waste may well be a limiting factor in exploitation of nuclear fuel. At a time when such immense decisions are called for, review of existing disposal sites is not encouraging. The Controller General of the United States, in a January 12, 1976 report to Congress regarding such sites, found that:

"---systematic site selection criteria have not been established,
--important earth science characteristics have not been well defined at some existing disposal sites, and
-some disposal sites are releasing radioactivity to the environment."

A June 30, 1976 House Committee on Government Operations report on low-level nuclear waste disposal stated that: "At present, site management and monitoring appears to be a fairly primitive art, shared by Federal and State governmental agencies and by private contractors."

The crux of articulated reasons for opposition to nuclear energy is based, at least in part, on concerns for safety and the possibility of future accidents in the long-term storage of nuclear wastes.

Proponents of nuclear power believe that such wastes can be handled safely.

As in other areas, the accomplishments of technology and science have multiplied environmental problems. While recognizing that there is some risk in every decision and that knowledge is never complete, the complex problems involving radioactive wastes

including care and maintenance of radioactive disposal sites in perpetuity signal the need for a go-slow approach.

Even where technical solutions appear within reach, lack of proper and aggressive application of management principles may result in situations such as pilfering and uncontrolled removal of radioactive materials, as occurred recently at the Beatty, Nevada low-level, commercial radioactive waste disposal site. Such incidents should emphasize that extreme care must be taken in coming to decisions which may effect future generations for thousands of years.