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Major Themes from the Bipartisan Policy Center Regional Nuclear Waste Stakeholder Meetings

The Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) launched its Nuclear Waste Council in January 2014 to expand the national and regional conversation about nuclear waste and to develop policy options that could lead to an implementable and enduring nuclear waste strategy for the nation.

As part of an effort to reinvigorate the national discussion on nuclear waste disposal, the Council convened five regional meetings across the United States. Each meeting included two components: a private discussion among key stakeholders, chosen for their broad representation and varying perspectives on the nuclear waste issue, and a public meeting that covered matters relevant to the national issue of nuclear waste disposal and that also provided an opportunity to hear local and regional concerns. The objective at all of the meetings was to identify barriers to solving the nuclear waste problem and to explore options for removing or reducing those barriers. Meetings were held in Boston, Massachusetts; Atlanta, Georgia; Chicago, Illinois; San Juan Capistrano, California; and Richland, Washington.

This issue brief, one in a BPC series of primers on the topic, summarizes key takeaways from the regional meetings. It identifies major themes that emerged at the meetings, as well as some of the specific issues that are important to stakeholders in each region. It is important to emphasize at the outset that this summary does not attempt to capture every view or opinion expressed at the regional meetings, nor do we claim to have captured—even in general terms—the full range of views or opinions that exists on any of these issues.



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Key Themes

Past efforts to site and develop a permanent disposal facility for spent nuclear fuel and high-level radioactive waste in the United States have generated decades of controversy and opposition. Today, more than 30 years after Congress first attempted to define a path for the long-term disposition of nuclear waste in the 1982 Nuclear Waste Policy Act, the future of the federal government's nuclear waste management program remains uncertain. Against this backdrop, it was not surprising to hear a wide range of strongly held and sometimes sharply divergent views at the Nuclear Waste Council's regional meetings. But the meetings also provided a useful reminder that despite the apparent intractability of the nuclear waste issue, a substantial and even broad-based consensus exists about the need to address the problem and even about the core elements of a durable solution. There is broad agreement, for example, that disposal in a deep geologic repository is the best practical option for isolating spent nuclear fuel and high-level radioactive waste over the timescales needed to ensure that these materials do not pose a threat to public health and safety or the environment. Further, there is broad agreement that states, tribes, and local communities must have a voice in deciding where to locate nuclear waste facilities and must have confidence that the safety of their citizens will be protected. Finally, there is broad agreement from multiple perspectives that an indefinite continuation of the current stalemate is unacceptable: not least because it leaves some states and communities to bear the involuntary risks and burdens of hosting long-term nuclear waste storage sites while also leaving the U.S. government—and ultimately American taxpayers—exposed to mounting financial liabilities. Moreover, there was unanimous agreement that these wastes—which were created for defense and commercial purposes that benefited current and previous generations—should not be left to the next generation to clean up.

How one might build on these points of agreement to get the U.S. waste management program on track and moving forward is, of course, is another question—one that generated considerably more disagreement and debate at the regional meetings. Another major point of debate concerned what should be done with existing waste and with new or existing nuclear power plants in the meantime. The remainder of this section summarizes key points of general agreement and key points of disagreement based on views expressed at the regional meetings.¹

Areas of General Agreement

- The best option for certain types of nuclear waste is disposal in a deep geological repository to achieve maximum isolation from the environment.
- There is no technical basis for requiring commercial and defense wastes to be disposed of in the same facility.
- Developing a national strategy is more of a political problem than a technical one.
- The history of the U.S. waste management program has seriously eroded trust and confidence in the ability of the federal government—and particularly the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE)—to meet its statutory obligation to effectively manage and dispose of nuclear waste.
- An independent agency of some type should be established to assume responsibility for the nuclear waste program; that agency should be insulated from Congress and from political influence and should enjoy continuity of management and access to funding.

¹ We note that many of the major themes and issues that arose at the regional meetings and that are summarized here are also prominent in the final report and recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Nuclear Future.

- Consolidated storage is not a final solution; thus, progress must be made toward siting one or more final repositories by taking an integrated approach to storage and disposal.
- At present, no working definition exists for what a consent-based agreement would be. There was consensus that the process for generating such an agreement cannot be top-down. Almost all participants in BPC's regional meetings described a process in which host communities and tribal governments are invited to participate in a forum where the opportunities and risks are clearly defined and where participants agree on what defines consent and agree on an end point for opting out.
- The issue of working with corridor communities through which waste will transit and gaining their trust and cooperation will be a significant one and may prove as challenging as siting a facility.
- Resolving issues related to cask design and transport will require significant research and resources.
- The current radioactive waste classification system is inadequate and would benefit from a more risk-informed approach.

Areas of Disagreement and Continued Discussion

- There is a range of views on whether spent fuel from decommissioned sites should be moved to consolidated storage or remain on site until it can be moved to a permanent disposal facility.
- Stakeholders disagree about whether the spent fuel that has been removed from pools and located in dry-cask storage on site is safe as it is or whether it should be reconfigured to meet specifications for so-called hardened on-site storage (HOSS).
- There is disagreement about whether waste should be reprocessed or used as a future fuel source; this disagreement reflects widely divergent views about the economic viability and real or perceived risks, in terms of nuclear security and weapons proliferation, associated with reprocessing.
- Stakeholders have different views about whether or not nuclear power plants should be allowed to continue to operate until the waste problem is resolved.
- There is disagreement about whether or not the transportation of nuclear waste is safe. The safety record is sound for transportation on the scale that has been achieved to date, but public perception and confidence are very low.
- There is strong disagreement about whether Yucca Mountain is a technically suitable site for nuclear waste disposal.
- Stakeholders have different views about whether the government should amend the portion of the Atomic Energy Act that would increase states' authorities with respect to regulating nuclear materials.
- Finally, there is disagreement about whether the Nuclear Waste Fund should be restricted to waste-disposal activities only.

Regional Issues

The regional meetings also revealed notable differences in views of the nuclear waste issue and attitudes toward nuclear power more generally in different parts of the country. At some meetings, participants appeared more supportive of nuclear energy in principle and saw a resolution of the waste issue as important for the industry's future. At other meetings, participants expressed views that were more agnostic or negative toward nuclear energy but shared a sense of urgency about removing and disposing of spent nuclear fuel and high-level waste, particularly from decommissioned commercial reactors and DOE sites. Some differences of nuance or emphasis reflected differences in geography and past patterns of nuclear technology development. For example, at the Boston meeting, participants underscored the need to expedite the transfer of spent fuel from pools to dry storage; in California, there was concern about assuring safe storage in locations that may be vulnerable to risks from events like earthquakes or tsunamis; and in Washington state, many participants were focused on the cleanup of atomic-era legacy waste at DOE's Hanford Site. In the Southeast, where nuclear energy plays a larger role in the regional energy mix and where plans to construct new plants have gone forward, there was more discussion about the impacts of different policies on nuclear utility ratepayers. And in Chicago, participants debated options for advancing a consent-based solution to the challenge of siting a disposal facility and emphasized the importance of regional approaches to transportation and planning issues.

Obviously many more issues were raised at the regional meetings than we have mentioned here. Moreover, it must be emphasized that even within each meeting, BPC heard a range of views on specific issues, whether the topic was the desirability of developing consolidated interim storage or the feasibility of pursuing state-led or private waste management options. The more important point for the purposes of this summary is that regional differences exist that could have important implications for future waste management efforts and that should not be overlooked in national-level discussions about the future of the U.S. waste management program.

Conclusion

BPC's primary motivation in launching the Nuclear Waste Council was to renew a national dialogue on resolving barriers to the safe storage and disposal of nuclear waste. The first phase of this work has helped to bring into focus major areas of consensus and disagreement, while also identifying notable regional differences in stakeholders' views of the nuclear waste management challenge. Taken together, these points offer insights that can help all parties strategically link and act on critical issues and address areas of regional- and national-level concern. More broadly, we believe that only an approach that considers all of these points holds promise for eventually reaching a national consensus on how to proceed. The next phase of the Nuclear Waste Council will build on these insights and on the knowledge-sharing that occurred at these meetings to develop recommendations for achieving a resolution of the nuclear waste problem—a resolution that, in many ways, already has broad support and that many stakeholders and experts still believe is well within reach.



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Founded in 2007 by former Senate Majority Leaders Howard Baker, Tom Daschle, Bob Dole and George Mitchell, the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) is a non-profit organization that drives principled solutions through rigorous analysis, reasoned negotiation and respectful dialogue. With projects in multiple issue areas, BPC combines politically balanced policymaking with strong, proactive advocacy and outreach.

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