Advances in Social Aspects of Nuclear Waste Management

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Good morning everyone, for the next hour or so we'll hear three perspectives on the social aspects of nuclear waste management. Stewart Brand pointed out yesterday that we must think differently about the future if we are to succeed and this certainly applies to nuclear waste management, at least the long term aspects of nuclear waste management.

We enjoy the electricity produced by nuclear energy and in some areas we enjoy the employment and the economic benefits it creates. However, as a society we have not yet fully come to terms of dealing with its byproducts and especially the long term management aspects. I think Stewart Brant characterized it as an open issue.

For many people, including a large number of scientists, technology has all of the answers. In fact, many countries with major nuclear power programs have made policy decisions that high level waste and used fuel will be stored in a deep geologic formation. Canada first made this policy decision as far back as 1978, and like many other countries invested heavily in repository technology. By the mid eighties, I think Canada was considered a world leader in this area through the program lead by AECL. W have to date in this country alone, spent over one billion dollars on this technology.

By the mid nineties significant advances in technology had been made and something close to an international consensus, at least amongst the scientists working in this area, was that high level waste and the used fuel couldn't be stored in a deep geological formation. However, almost all of those countries encountered social, political problems either in the pre-siting or the siting phases. A variety of responses developed depending on the social political characteristics of the individual countries.

For example; having failed to find a willing host community, both Finland and Sweden regrouped and each found a willing host for their repositories within existing nuclear communities. The U.S made a political decision to locate their repository at Yuka Mountain, on the Nevada test site. The U.K, France and Canada decided to step back and to reassess options. All three have recently re-committed to the deep geologic policy.

How these countries plan to proceed is different in each case. In the early days collaboration between countries was mainly on technology and this certainly continues today. However in more recent times the focus has shifted to the social political implication. In 1998, eleven countries with well defined nuclear waste management programs formed an association, or an organization called "E-DRUM" with the objective of sharing experiences in this area and developing strategies.

I think it is safe to say that although the approaches differ in each individual country, there are a number of commonly held views; we all agree that the burden for taking care of radio active waste should not simply be passed to a future generation. We all agree that spent fuel and high level waste is being safely stored on an interim basis and that this could continue safely, for many decades to come.

We all agree that development of long-term management solutions must proceed irrespective of the future of nuclear power. All members have concluded that the geologic storage is technically safe; all members agree there is a need for flexibility. We all agree that there is a need for open and ethical involvement of stakeholders in decision making.