

Waste dump advocates, opponents meet at summit

(AP) — While Gov. Ben Nelson hopes a solid solution can come out of a summit this week on low-level radioactive waste, supporters of a proposed waste dump in Nebraska say the meeting may be little more than thin air.

Nelson has called together national experts and local adversaries to meet Thursday to discuss alternatives to a waste-disposal site proposed to be built in Boyd County.

Supporters of the waste site proposed by the Central Interstate Low-Level Radioactive Waste Commission say alternatives already have been considered.

Nelson cited several national developments, including a halt in other states' efforts to find waste sites, and suggestions by radioactive waste expert Ed Helminski that efforts to develop new waste sites should slow down or stop while consideration is given to using existing private and federally owned waste sites.

That suggestion gained added weight from Helminski's status as one of the architects of the system of interstate compacts, of which Central Interstate is one, to dispose of waste.

"There's absolutely no reason to have any new sites opened anywhere, even in the federal system," Helminski said in an interview last week.

The big change from when Congress mandated the compact system in the early 1980s is that the Cold War is over, Helminski said. Department of Energy sites formerly used for building nuclear weapons need to be cleaned up and potentially could be used to dispose of low-level waste, he said.

Gene Crump, executive director of the Central Interstate commission, said that group already has explored the alternatives suggested by Helminski. It has not been able to reach agreements for long-term access to private waste sites in other states including South Carolina and Washington, he said.

As for access to federal sites, Crump said, "Thus far, the Department of Energy has said there's access only for federal-generated waste, not state- or compact-generated waste."

Nevertheless, Terry Plummer, the manager of federal Energy Department's low-level radioactive waste program said Helminski is asking the same questions many other people are asking.

Because of cleanup agreements the federal government has reached with states where federal sites are located, "the notion that we could make an immediate change and consider DOE facilities (for civilian waste disposal) is

probably not realistic," said Plummer, who is also scheduled to speak Thursday.

However, he said, there is a "convergence" between federal and commercial waste management activities, with the federal government allowing commercial ventures on its sites and having some of its waste treated off-site.

"We as a nation will be able to consider these kind of opportunities more in the future than we do today," he said.

Crump, who also will speak at the summit, said he will talk about efforts to get a state license for the Boyd County site that so far have cost about \$83.9 million.

While state officials have resisted commission attempts to speed up their review, they have said draft documents on key decisions could be ready by October.

"I'm certain that the compact system is still the best system for disposal ...," Crump said.

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