

Beyond Nuclear

working for a world free from nuclear power and nuclear weapons



The Nuclear Waste Policy Act (NWPA) prohibits the federal government from taking title to commercial nuclear waste until a permanent repository is operational. Amending the NWPA to let the federal government take ownership of nuclear waste and transport it to consolidated “interim” storage would undermine the Act’s purpose, creating de facto permanent surface storage.

Interim Storage Creates Three Key Inequities:

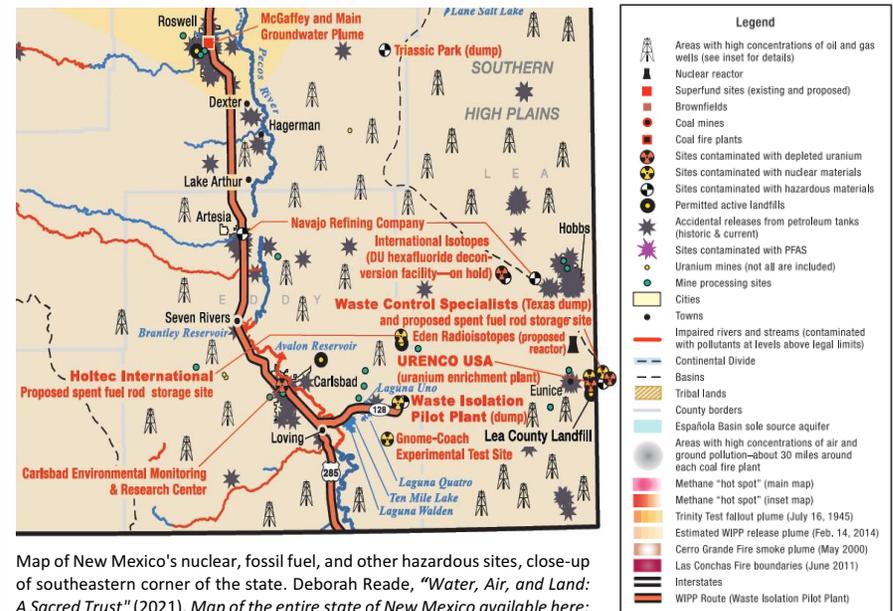
- 1. Economic Inequity:** Consolidated interim storage would shift responsibility for nuclear waste from the nuclear industry to the U.S. government before a repository is licensed, transferring a range of costs currently borne by reactor licensees to federal taxpayers, including the high costs of transportation and accident liability.
- 2. Environmental Injustice:** Sending America’s nuclear waste to a “temporary” storage site would offload tons of radioactive waste—in addition to environmental and public health burdens—onto communities that did not consent to hosting permanent disposal sites.
- 3. Political Inequity:** If the federal government accepts ownership of and liability for nuclear waste before a repository is operational, the nuclear industry will lose any incentive to participate in the development of a permanent waste disposal system.

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Consolidated "Interim" Storage of Highly Radioactive Nuclear Waste: A Dangerous Dead-End Detour Away from a Repository

Environmental Justice Case Study: In New Mexico, the fossil fuel and nuclear weapons industries have long harmed public health and the environment. Generations of young Native American men have fallen ill or died from mining uranium, and former mining lands are still widely contaminated with radiation. The state also hosts the nation’s only commercial uranium enrichment facility and the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant for transuranic military nuclear waste.

In May 2023, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) licensed Holtec International to build a consolidated nuclear waste storage facility in southeastern New Mexico. The facility would force tens of thousands of tons of radioactive material upon communities who have already suffered devastating, multi-generational health impacts from radiation. Compounding the injury, the NRC licensed a second company, Interim Storage Partners (ISP), to build a similar facility in Texas—just 40 miles away. While these licenses are the subject of multiple lawsuits, if the facilities are built, there will be lasting impacts on the surrounding communities.



Map of New Mexico's nuclear, fossil fuel, and other hazardous sites, close-up of southeastern corner of the state. Deborah Reade, “Water, Air, and Land: A Sacred Trust” (2021). Map of the entire state of New Mexico available here: <https://perma.cc/Q8TK-8GAM>.

Consolidated Interim Storage Adds Substantial Transportation Risks

Increased Travel Time = Increased Risks

Transporting nuclear waste into consolidated interim storage will put **90,000 tons of nuclear waste** onto America's highways, waterways, and rail lines, traversing a large chunk of the country.

–If we wait for a **permanent repository**, nuclear waste would only be transported once: from the reactor site to the repository.

–If we use **interim storage** before a repository is set up, nuclear waste would be transported twice: (1) from the reactor site to the storage facility, and then (2) from the storage facility to the repository.

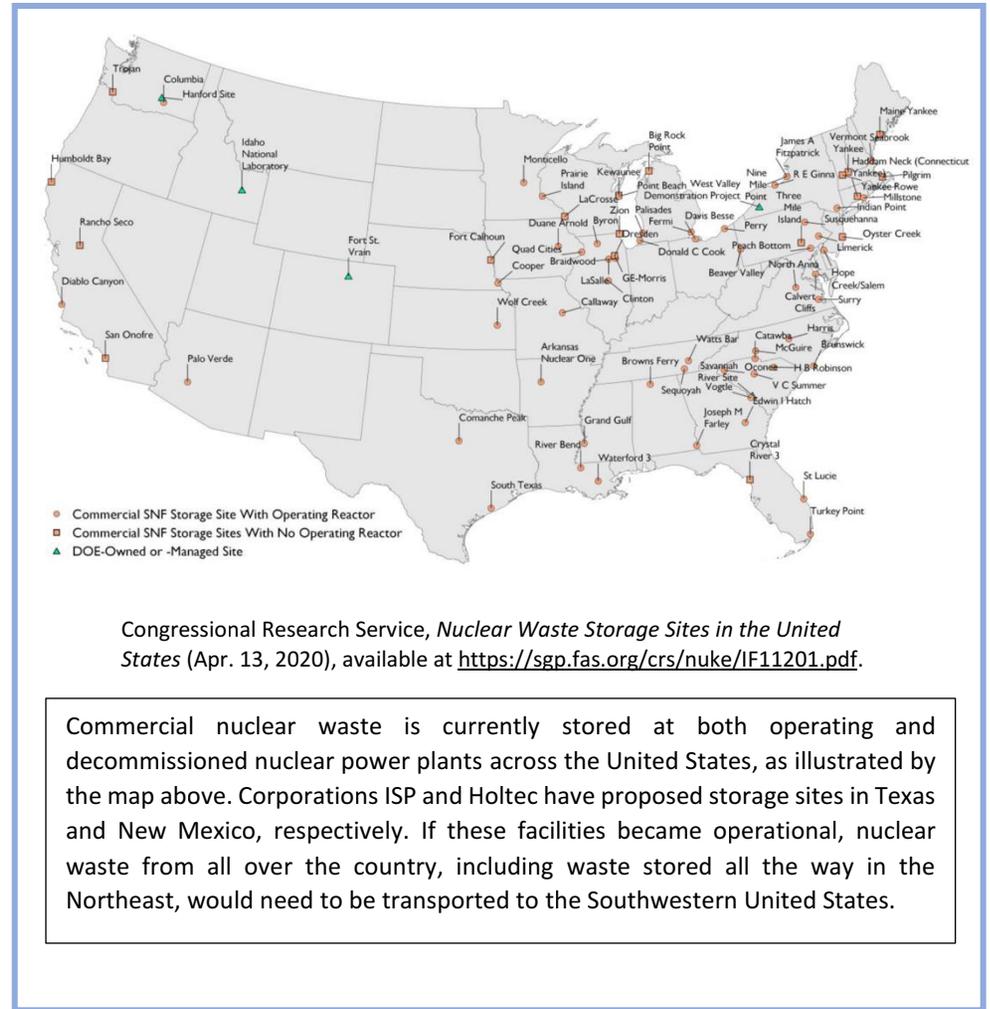
→ This increases the time that our roads, highways, rail systems, waterways, and surrounding communities are exposed to radiation risks from:

⇒ **Transport Accidents.** Accidents during the transport of nuclear waste can release radioactivity capable of injuring or killing large numbers of people, plants, and animals. These impacts can last generations. With 1,000 train derailments in the U.S. each year, there is a concerning risk that people and the environment will be exposed to radiation during transport.¹

⇒ **Handling Errors.** Improper loading, shipping, storing, or unloading of a spent fuel cask can damage the cask and release radioactivity.²

⇒ **Cask Weeping.** When spent fuel casks are placed in cooling pools, their surfaces are exposed to contamination in the pool water. Cask “weeping” occurs when some of this contamination becomes “removable” after the cask is exposed to moisture, humidity, rain, and sunlight during transportation.³

⇒ **Security Threats.** Nuclear waste can be intercepted or sabotaged during transport.⁴ Attacks on transport vehicles could contaminate surrounding communities with radioactivity.



Congressional Research Service, *Nuclear Waste Storage Sites in the United States* (Apr. 13, 2020), available at <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/nuke/IF11201.pdf>.

Commercial nuclear waste is currently stored at both operating and decommissioned nuclear power plants across the United States, as illustrated by the map above. Corporations ISP and Holtec have proposed storage sites in Texas and New Mexico, respectively. If these facilities became operational, nuclear waste from all over the country, including waste stored all the way in the Northeast, would need to be transported to the Southwestern United States.

¹ Beyond Nuclear Letter to Pete Buttigieg (Feb. 24, 2023), available at: <https://beyondnuclear.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2-24-23-FINAL-BN-DOT-one-year-follow-up-letter-2-24-23-FINAL-BN-DOT-one-year-follow-up-letter-.pdf>.

² Steven Pike, What Are the Safety Risks When Transporting Radioactive Materials? (2019), available at: <https://www.argonelectronics.com/blog/radiological-risks-transporting-radioactive-materials#:~:text=The%20normal%20transport%20of%20radioactive,designed%20to%20minimise%20the%20exposures.>

³A Historical Review of the Safe Transport of Spent Nuclear Fuel at page 35 (Aug. 31, 2016), available at: https://www.energy.gov/sites/prod/files/2017/03/f34/Enhanced%20safety%20record%20report%20-%20final%20public%20release_0.pdf.

⁴ International Atomic Energy Agency, Transport Security (2024), available at: <https://www.iaea.org/topics/transport-security#:~:text=This%20could%20include%2C%20for%20example,standards%20and%20nuclear%20security%20guidance.>