

COMMITTEE TO BRIDGE THE GAP

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UCSF SEARCH FOR LOCAL STORAGE PLACE FOR RADIOACTIVE WASTES IS DUE TO
ITS REFUSAL TO ACCEPT LIABILITY IN CASE ITS WASTES LEAK AT EXISTING
DISPOSAL FACILITY

Refusal to accept liability in case its radioactive wastes leak at an existing disposal facility in South Carolina is the real reason UC San Francisco is now considering expanding its local storage of radioactive waste, it was revealed today. The liability commitment is being required by a radioactive waste dump in Barnwell, South Carolina, to protect against possible clean-up and other costs resulting from leaking radioactive contamination. South Carolina signed an agreement with California officials last year to continue to accept California radioactive wastes. Attorneys for UC San Francisco recommended against signing the disclaimer.

“UCSF has a place to send its radioactive wastes,” said Dr. Joseph Lyou, executive director of the Committee to Bridge the Gap, a nuclear watchdog group. “They’re just unwilling to promise Barnwell that their wastes are safe. The irony is that UCSF wastes are not nearly as dangerous as those produced by nuclear power plants. Virtually all medical wastes decay rapidly. Nuclear power plant wastes are toxic for hundreds of years.”

The decision to consider local storage of UCSF radioactive wastes is part of a larger, ongoing controversy over a proposal to build a radioactive waste dump in Ward Valley, California, 20 miles from the Colorado River. 90% of the wastes to go to Ward Valley would be long-lived nuclear power plant wastes. Wastes from hospitals and universities would comprise only a few tenths of a percent of the total. “Because a dump for nuclear power plant wastes is such a tough sell, proponents of Ward Valley have been trying to sell it as a medical dump,” said Dr. Lyou. “Specious claims that medical treatment and research would grind to a halt if a dump designed

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almost exclusively for nuclear reactor wastes doesn't open are fear-mongering at its worst," Lyou said.

Medical wastes represent only a tiny fraction of the radioactive wastes destined for the proposed Ward Valley dump. For example, from January 1988 to September 1991, UCSF generated 66 curies of low-level radioactive waste. During that time period, the San Onofre Nuclear Power Plant generated nearly 6,000 curies of low-level radioactive waste, according to data released by the California Department of Health Services.

"We have no problem with the safe storage of small amounts of short-lived medical wastes," said Lyou. "A monitored, centralized storage-to-decay facility for medical wastes, is not in itself a bad idea." Storage-to-decay is used successfully by some research and medical facilities. Stanford and the Mayo Clinic, for example, store-to-decay their short-lived radioactive wastes. "UCSF may have the right idea but the wrong plan," said Lyou.

"You have to question the ethical propriety of using such sensationalism to push for Ward Valley," Lyou said.

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