

Plan to transport nuclear waste to West Texas draws concern

A proposal to send high-level nuclear waste to West Texas may seem like something Houstonians shouldn't worry about. But if approved, some of the state's largest metro areas could be in the path of thousands of shipments of radioactive materials as they make their way from plants across the country.

Interim Storage Partners, formed by Orano USA and Waste Control Specialists LLC, is applying for an initial 40-year license to eventually store 40,000 metric tons of used nuclear fuel in an existing facility in Andrews County. Those in favor say it will save taxpayers money and provide a temporary solution to the decades-old impasse over finding a permanent storage solution for the country's nuclear waste. But critics, made up of an unlikely coalition of environmentalists, ranchers and some in the oil industry, say the plan is not worth the risk of exposure en route to, or at, the storage site.

So far, the plan appears to be moving forward. A panel of administrative judges with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission recently ruled that several advocacy groups won't be able to argue their case before commissioners weighing whether to approve the plan, saying they don't have standing in the proceedings. The commission is expected to finish its review of the application by May 2021, but environmentalists have vowed to keep fighting. If the plan does go through, a University of Houston professor warns, the company should be prepared to remain involved for the long haul. "When they design it, they better design it for very longtime storage because I don't see this long-term storage being addressed any time soon," said Ramanan Krishnamoorti, UH's chief energy officer.

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