

# Editorial: Wasden on right side of Idaho's nuclear waste debate [Edit](#)

## Spokesman-Review Editorial Board

A dispute over importation of nuclear waste into Idaho has triggered a rare case of political fission that has evenly split four present and former governors.

But the critical element is Attorney General Lawrence Wasden. So far, he's right where he should be: on the side of the law.

The divide originates with a 1995 agreement signed by then-Gov. Phil Batt that blocks shipments of more waste into Idaho until the U.S. Department of Energy develops and implements technology that can convert liquid waste into a more stable powder. The deadline for disposing of the stocks already in Idaho is 2035.

The department also was supposed to clean out underground tanks holding low-level waste.

But the \$572 million Integrated Waste Treatment Unit that is supposed to solidify the liquid material has not progressed as planned, which would not surprise anyone familiar with the history of the proposed Hanford Nuclear Reservation vitrification plant, which would isolate highly radioactive waste in glass logs. That Washington project has become a money pit many years behind schedule.

In Idaho, the DOE has tried to make the importation of 50 fuel rods more acceptable despite delays in waste treatment by suggesting that as much as \$20 million might be invested in rod-related research annually over the next five years. But if the state does not sign off on the deal by mid-September, the DOE is threatening to look for alternative locations for the project, perhaps Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

Wasden is unmoved. He refuses to sign a waiver that would allow the fuel into Idaho. Batt and Cecil Andrus, another former governor, are on his side.

But Gov. Butch Otter and his predecessor, U.S. Sen. Jim Risch, say the state risks losing a significant economic boost if Idaho does not act, and soon. They and local boosters warn that turning away the waste and the associated research may discourage future federal investment at Idaho National Laboratory, and the highly educated workers who want to participate in cutting-edge science.

Wasden had been optimistic he might be able to sign the waiver if the expected September start-up of the waste unit did not slip. It did, and despite the pressure from Risch and Otter, who must co-sign with Wasden, the attorney general continues to balk.

Andrus, who sandwiched a tour as U.S. secretary of the interior between his four terms as governor, says his firsthand experience with the DOE tells him Idaho cannot rely on its promises. The department did nothing to build its credibility by stiff-arming his request for documents related to the deal.

Andrus has filed an appeal to get the documents, but in the meantime Wasden will have to hold off Otter, Risch, and just about every other Idaho official who never saw a one-sided deal – on school Internet, jail operations, whatever – they would not take. We have long been impressed by Wasden's care for the law even when it sets him apart, and holding the DOE to a 20-year-old deal would reinforce our opinion the people of Idaho are very well served by their lawyer.