

# Once nuclear waste arrives in Idaho, it never leaves

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Mention the U.S. Department of Energy to people in northern Idaho and eastern Washington, and they instantly conjure up images of the Hanford Nuclear Reservation.

There, more than 50 million gallons of high-level radioactive wastes sit in 177 rusting tanks, some of them single-lined. Over the years, more than a million gallons have seeped into the environment.

DOE's laboratory near Idaho Falls has a much better record. Much of the credit for that goes to two of Idaho's former governors, Democrat Cecil Andrus and Republican Phil Batt.

Frustrated at DOE's empty promises to clean up and remove radioactive materials from the site - some of which had been buried in leaking containers above the Snake River Plain Aquifer - Andrus in the early 1990s famously sealed the border to additional nuclear waste shipments into Idaho.

When Batt took over in 1995, he kept up the pressure until the federal government signed a landmark court-ordered settlement - imposing upon DOE a series of binding cleanup milestones. As long as the DOE complied, the federal government could continue to bring a limited amount of spent nuclear fuel into Idaho. And by 2035, all waste had to be removed, subject to a \$60,000 a day fine.

Some of the most vexing problems have been addressed. Key among them was digging up substantial amounts of plutonium-contaminated clothing and equipment buried in the Arco desert and then transporting it to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant at Carlsbad, N.M. So far, the INL accounts for 5,844 of the 11,894 shipments sent to New Mexico from all over the country.

But an accident at the storage site has closed that facility to future shipments for at least another year.

Idaho National Laboratory started out with 20 million gallons of high-level wastes generated from the reprocessing of naval nuclear fuel. Most was transformed into a more manageable solid form in the 1990s, but that still left about 900,000 gallons sitting in three double-lined stainless steel tanks.

Under the Batt agreement, the rest was supposed to be treated by the end of 2012. Problems with the \$571 million Integrated Waste Treatment Unit put the project on indefinite hold.

Until both issues are remedied, the DOE is in violation of the Batt settlement. The door to Idaho is closed. DOE can't bring new spent fuel to Idaho.

But last week, Andrus and Batt sounded the alarm about Energy Secretary Ernest J. Moniz' request to do precisely that. Nuclear reactor fuel core life cycles have nearly tripled and Moniz wants INL scientists to review how prolonged radiation affects fuel rods.

They took Idaho Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter and Attorney General Lawrence Wasden to task for supporting a deal. That could be premature. In their letter to Moniz, the Idaho officials condition allowing the shipments into Idaho if Moniz can provide an "enforceable commitment and timeframe" for reopening the New Mexico facility and treating Idaho's liquid wastes.

The two former governors also might be relying on faulty information. For instance, they said DOE wants to ship 37.5 tons of spent fuel to Idaho - which, if true would expand INL's spent fuel inventory by 12.5 percent and could have no explanation other than using Idaho as a waste dump.

Instead, Moniz's plan may only involve about 50 rods in two shipments, totaling about 220 pounds.

But you can't blame Andrus and Batt for being suspicious. Otter has known each of them for decades. He understands their commitment to the settlement agreement and their distrust for the DOE. He knew how they'd react to being blindsided.

At best, keeping them in the dark was a rookie mistake from a three-term governor. At worst, it was deliberate.

On the other hand, the work Moniz envisions involves anywhere from \$10 million to \$20 million a year for the next five years. Putting the word out that the nation's lead nuclear lab is temporarily closed to new spent fuel shipments isn't good for business, but it's hardly fatal to a \$900-million-a-year installation.

Here's what Andrus and Batt got right - every pound of spent nuclear fuel transported to Idaho will remain in Idaho.

The Batt agreement's 2035 deadline notwithstanding, it has no other place to go.

The Obama administration has abandoned plans to open a nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain, Nev. If an alternative site opens, it will happen no earlier than 2048.

In such an environment, Idaho's strongest card is its power to block new shipments.

If Otter and Wasden are willing to trade that leverage for \$10 million to \$20 million a year, what precedent will they set?

What will future governors and attorneys general say 20 years from now - when Andrus and Batt won't be here to complain about it? - M.T.