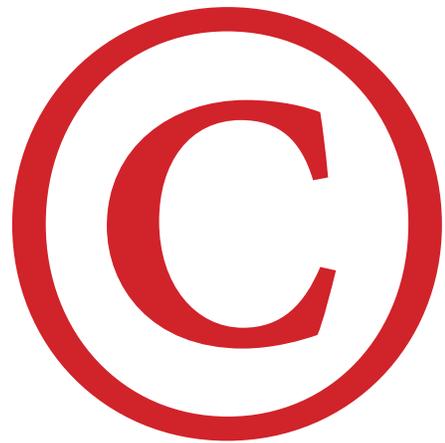


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Goshute Nuclear Waste Repository: Un-American or Very American?

BY DAVID R. KELLER

Like most Utahns, I had not heard of the Skull Valley Band of the Goshute until Tribal Chairman Leon Bear, who is part of a legal-savvy generation of leaders known for asserting the rights of American Indians more forcefully than their forebears, announced plans to store 40,000 metric tons of high-level radioactive waste on their reservation.

And, like most Utahns, I am opposed to storing out-of-state nuclear waste within close proximity to a million people.

But the Goshute are not entirely to blame for the disconcerting plan. Rather, Bear's motivations must be seen through the lens of Goshute history.

Roaming the Great Basin, the Goshute once numbered 20,000. But by the mid-1900s the tribe had been decimated by disease, violent clashes with settlers and encroachment of habitable land by immigrants of European ancestry. In 1863, Goshute leaders signed a treaty with the federal government granting sovereignty of arid and desolate Skull Valley, making it one of 554 autonomous "nations" within the borders of the United States.

Presently, only 125 Skull Valley Goshute remain, and the 30 living on the reservation have virtually no economic opportunities. Thus it is no surprise that Bear would be interested in reaping the benefits of the proposed \$3 billion nuclear repository project.

The federal government initiated the proposal. Realizing that sovereignty meant fewer legal complications, the Atomic Energy Commission issued a grant to the Goshute for a feasibility study in the early 1990s. In 1997, the tribe agreed to lease 40 acres to Private Fuel Storage (PFS), a private consortium of electric utility companies, to store the waste for 20 years, with an additional 20-year option.

Constitutionally, federal law trumps state law, making the Goshute-PFS plan legal. This has irked Utah politicians, who have described American Indian sovereignty as "un-American." Taken in context, however, the plan appears to be very American: The Goshute are simply beating capitalists at our own game.

Consider the fact that Utah state and local leaders have welcomed other nearby hazardous waste sites with open arms: Tooele Army Depot, home to the nation's largest stockpile of chemical weapons; Dugway Proving Ground, a biological warfare testing site; Envirocare, a low-level radioactive waste dump; Grassy Mountain hazardous waste site; several toxic waste incinerators; and Magcorp, which emits enough chlorine and sulfur dioxide to make Tooele County one of the 10 most polluted areas in the nation.

The incoherence of Utah state leadership over the Goshute-PFS plan comes to the fore with a rumored countermeasure that surfaced in September to instead store the waste on remote state lands -- for a price. According to Utah Republican Chairman Joe Cannon, "It would be a great shame for Utah to be stuck with this and not get a benefit." And last month, Rep. Jim Hansen, a reliable foe of wilderness who has endorsed hazardous-waste sites, proposed half a million acres of wilderness in the West Desert for the purpose of blocking shipments to Skull Valley. Obviously, opposition to the plan is more than environmental.

There is a simple solution to this complex problem, which has been suggested within the pages of The Salt Lake Tribune and elsewhere: provide the Goshute with long-overdue economic development programs to mitigate their desire for the repository. Since there is dissension within the tribe, perhaps Bear would reconsider the repository if viable alternatives existed.

In short, attempts by Utah political leaders to derail the Goshute-PFS plan are simply the latest chapter in a long story of injustices to American Indians. Unless taxpayers are willing to provide economic support, the Goshute are legally and morally justified in pursuing the right to self-

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determination in overcoming the marginalization they have long suffered.

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