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## A Watchdog's Warning on Nuclear Waste

By [MATTHEW L. WALD](#)

Agence France-Presse — Getty Images The entrance to Yucca Mountain in Nevada. A commission opens hearings this week aimed at identifying alternative sites or methods for disposing of the nation's nuclear waste.

When President Obama [said](#) he wanted to discontinue work to develop a nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain in Nevada, one of the entities that filed suit to protect the project was Washington State, where vast amounts of nuclear waste accumulated at the Hanford nuclear reservation, a weapons site. As I [reported](#) on Sunday, a new report suggests that Hanford has a lot more plutonium waste that the Energy Department had acknowledged.

This week, a blue-ribbon [commission](#) on nuclear waste established to seek alternatives to Yucca will hold two days of hearings near Hanford. And one of the experts giving testimony will be Gerry Pollet, executive director of [Heart of America Northwest](#), which describes itself as a watchdog group focused on Hanford.

Mr. Pollet's prepared testimony argues that Hanford has deeper problems than the possible demise of Yucca Mountain. Even if Yucca had opened as planned 10 years ago, it would not have enough space for all of Hanford's wastes, he argues. The Energy Department is trying to build a factory at Yucca that will take liquid wastes and mix them with molten glass to produce a solid, as a factory at another bomb plant in South Carolina is already doing. But at the moment, there is no final resting place for these "vitrified" wastes.

"Long-term on-site storage capacity for vitrified wastes has always been needed, along with a second deep geologic repository for high-level nuclear wastes," his prepared testimony says.

Heart of America's main argument is that wastes already buried or dumped at Hanford will, by the government's own projections, begin turning up in the Columbia River or in underground water supplies at levels hundreds of times higher than drinking water standards in centuries and millenniums to come, and that with no plan in place to clean up that material, the department should not bury any more.

But the group had a message more relevant to the blue-ribbon commission. The panel is studying whether the volume of used reactor fuel could be reduced and the longevity of its radioactive materials cut, by reprocessing it — that is, running it through chemical

processes to retrieve materials that could be put into new reactors as fuel.

Heart of America's argument is that the activity that produced the Hanford wastes was quite similar to this, with uranium from reactors chopped up to retrieve the plutonium created as a side-effect of nuclear fission. The lesson, Mr. Pollet warns, is that "reprocessing creates vast amounts of liquid high-level nuclear wastes."