

New group wants action on nuclear waste storage at San Onofre

Erika Ritchie, Orange County Register, 6-8-16

LAGUNA BEACH – Earthquakes, tsunamis or terrorism.

That’s what a newly created group of scientists, medical experts, activists and elected officials from Orange and San Diego counties say pose ominous threats to the more than 10 million people living within a 50-mile radius of the shuttered San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station.

“If one of those events happen, the amount of radiation could be 89 times more than what was released at Chernobyl,” said Rita Conn, a spokeswoman for the newly created Secure Nuclear Waste Coalition and chairwoman of Let Laguna Vote, a nonpartisan organization dedicated to government transparency.

On Wednesday, Conn kicked off a Secure Nuclear Waste Coalition educational forum and called the public to action.

Members of the group include Mayor Pam Patterson from San Juan Capistrano; Nina Babiarz of Nuclear Waste Transportation; Charles Langley, executive director of the Public Watchdogs; Robert Pope, a geologist; and Dr. William Honigman.

Panelists told more than 200 people inside a packed Laguna Beach City Council chambers that plans by Southern California Edison to temporarily bury millions of pounds of nuclear waste 42 yards from the ocean at San Onofre State Beach must be stopped.

The experts testified about the dangers the public faces by potential exposure to radiation or radiation leaks. They questioned the lack of security at the shuttered plant. They discussed the potential for it to become a terrorist target.

“There is an obscene level of unpreparedness,” Honigman said. “How do we deal with radiation exposure on a massive level?”

They advocated that Edison move the spent nuclear fuel rods to a temporary storage site in West Texas or New Mexico – an idea being explored by lawmakers and regulators.

They criticized the California Coastal Commission’s approval of a “concrete monolith” to house spent fuel in temporary, dry-cask storage at the site. The contained radioactive material is expected to remain in place until 2049.

“Edison must not be allowed to store the highly radioactive fuel rods in the ‘experimental’ ... thin-walled stainless steel canisters that have never been used in the damp marine environment, have no proven track record, no means to support transport and no means to inspect for radiological leaks,” Conn said.

The California Coastal Commission last year approved plans for the temporary burial of the San Onofre nuclear waste – which has been stored in liquid tanks – after political paralysis prevented the federal government from coming up with a permanent burial solution for the nation’s nuclear waste.

Southern California Edison has maintained that the waste will be safe and well-protected under current plans. The company also agrees that the waste should be removed from populous Southern California sooner than what's planned.

In a question and answer session following the panel discussion, Laguna Beach resident Marni Magda told the group how they can get the ball rolling through political pressure. She advocated calling on local officials such as 5th District Supervisor Chairman Lisa Bartlett for help.

"On April 28, the California Senate passed Resolution 23 asking the president, the Department of Energy and all California U.S. Congressional members to move the spent fuel away from San Onofre," she said.

"The military fuel will move soon," she said. "But commercial fuel can't be moved until we change the law. If we change the law, SCE is wanting to move the fuel in 2021 and will have all canisters removed by 2031."

For Donna Tiab, a Laguna Beach resident, the forum confirmed fears she's felt growing up next to the nuclear site for decades. As a young Girl Scout her mother kept her from going to camp trips at San Onofre State Beach.

"I'm concerned about the waste, how close it is and how it's stored," the 40-year-old mother of two said. "It's now time to act."