EIS000328

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Nuclear Power and Nuclear Waste

Nowhere in the United States is the problem of nuclear power and nuclear waste more evident than at Prairie Island. We live next to a nuclear neighbor 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Our homes, our community center, our church, our government center and our tribal business are all located less than 600 yards from a nuclear power plant and a nuclear waste storage site.

Our community did not ask for a nuclear neighbor; the power plant was forced upon us more than 30 years ago, when we didn't have the resources or a strong voice to fight it. The Atomic Energy Commission (today known as the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, or NRC), ignoring its federal trust responsibility to act in the best interest of the tribe, licensed Northern States Power Company (NSP) to operate the plant in our backyard.

By 1990, NSP had no place to store spent nuclear fuel. The utility was given permission by NRC to use up to 48 casks at the Prairie Island nuclear power plant. However, the state Public Utilities Commission required NSP to seek legislative approval. The legislature, noting the federal government's inaction to develop a national repository as promised, gave limited approval, allowing NSP to use 17 casks.

To date, NSP has filled nine casks and expects to fill 17 by the year 2007.

1 We want the nuclear waste removed as soon as possible, and we want our community's health and safety concerns addressed. Our people have suffered from unexplained health problems. We have asked the state and the federal government for answers. Each time we ask, we are told nuclear power is safe and we have nothing to worry about. We couldn't disagree more. All it takes is one accident at the power plant and the health of our tribal members and the future of our tribe, including our successful tribal business, would be permanently devastated.

2 The federal government continues to ignore its promise to the country and to utilities that it would take responsibility for the nuclear waste by the year 1998. Indeed, the Department of Energy (DOE) has said it would not be able to accept nuclear waste until at least 2012. And while DOE has been collecting money from utilities to build a national repository, it has not even determined what standards such a storage facility must meet.

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Nuclear Power And Nuclear Waste On Prairie Island

1973	Northern States Power Company's (NSP) Prairie Island nuclear power plant officially opens as the first nuclear reactor goes on line.
1974	NSP's second nuclear reactor goes on line.
Mid-1989	Facing unresolved spent nuclear fuel storage problems, NSP announces that it will develop a dry cask storage facility at the Prairie Island plant.
Aug. 1990	NSP submits a license application to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) for an on-site dry cask storage facility.
April 1991	NSP files a Certificate of Need application with the Public Utilities Commission (PUC). PUC approval is needed to temporarily store the spent fuel until it is removed by the Department of Energy (DOE). The application's key issues include the inadequacy of NSP's storage capacity (and its impact on the generation of electricity), and the DOE's lack of movement on a permanent repository.
Aug. 1992	The PUC grants limited Certificate of Need to NSP (17 casks, rather than the requested 48 because of DOE's delay on developing a national repository).
June 1993	The Minnesota Court of Appeals affirmed the PUC's finding that the dry cask storage facility would be in the public interest and found that, according to the Radioactive Waste Management Act, legislative approval for the facility would be necessary.
May 1994	The Minnesota Legislature approves use of 17 casks, but adds conditions, including that NSP must search for a new storage site in Goodhue County away from Prairie Island; and NSP must make commitments to develop renewable energy sources. The Legislature requires the state and NSP to sign a binding contract, giving the Prairie Island Indian Community third-party standing to enforce the legislation.
May 1995	The Nuclear Regulatory Commission authorizes NSP to load the first cask. NSP begins the loading process immediately.
Jan. 1996	The Prairie Island Indian Community and NSP bring to the state Legislature an agreement that would allow NSP to keep the storage casks on Prairie Island in return for compensation to the community, including the option to relocate tribal members. The Legislature rejects the deal.

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Protecting the Health and Safety of Our Community

The proximity of a nuclear power plant and a nuclear waste storage site, coupled with limited access on and off the island, threatens the safety and health of tribal members and the thousands of tourists who visit our tribal business. For this reason, we have made emergency planning and preparedness a priority.

Our land base is very small – 534 acres of low-lying Mississippi River bottom land on Prairie Island. The island was formed at the confluence of the Vermilion and Mississippi rivers in southeastern Minnesota and is subject to periodic flooding.

Despite this constant threat of flooding, there is only one road – Sturgeon Lake Road – that provides an improved evacuation route from the island to the mainland. Our community worked with the county to raise the elevation of this main road to above the 500-year flood level.

Still, this road is not always accessible. About 16-20 trains carrying between 10,000 and 30,000 carloads of hazardous materials traverse the island every day, blocking Sturgeon Lake Road as they pass. A derailment or a spill of hazardous chemicals would block the island's one route for evacuation.

Our concerns are not limited just to our community. At any one time, there may be as many as 11,000 people on Prairie Island, including tribal and non-tribal residents, guests at the tribe's casino, hotel or RV park, tribal government staff and NSP staff. With this many people to evacuate, and the fact that there is only one road that passes over water and is vulnerable to periodic flooding, it is clear our community needs access to a second road for evacuation purposes.

To address this problem, the Council has been working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to evaluate the feasibility of raising Church Road to provide a second evacuation route. Church Road can only be used in the winter and fall and it is well below the 100-year flood elevation. We also installed a water level gauge in the Mississippi and Vermilion rivers so we can predict well in advance the threat of flooding.

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