



An inflatable nuclear waste storage cask used to protest in Chicago.

# Q&A: What nuclear retirement could mean for Illinois and the Midwest

WRITTEN BY [Kari Lydersen](#) 7 hours ago -- MIDWEST ENERGY NEWS July 13, 2018

PHOTO BY Nuclear Energy Information Service

Members of Congress are scheduled to receive a briefing next week from nuclear energy experts and watchdogs on pending nuclear waste storage proposals and the decommissioning of nuclear plants that have closed or could soon. Among the organizers of the July 16 briefing and a related national lobby day is the Chicago-based [Nuclear Energy Information Service \(NEIS\)](#).

Like advocates for [communities with economies linked to coal](#), the NEIS is calling for a “just transition” for the neighbors of nuclear power plants. [The coalition](#) hosting the testimony notes that five nuclear plants have closed since 2013, “at least 10 more are expected to close in the next few years, including three owned by FirstEnergy,” and 16 are going through decommissioning – essentially remediation of waste and radiation.

Along with the economic impacts similar to those created when coal plants close, nuclear plant closings also usually mean nuclear waste is stored onsite for years to come. The federal government proposes to move this waste to a [Consolidated Interim Storage site \(CIS\)](#), until a long-term repository like the one long-proposed at [Yucca Mountain](#) is created. [Sites in New Mexico and Texas](#) are being concerned for CIS. Meanwhile Midwest nuclear watchdogs point to a [study by Oak Ridge National Laboratory](#) that found Illinois was theoretically an ideal site for CIS.

Nuclear Energy Information Service director Dave Kraft spoke with the Energy News Network before the Congressional briefing. The following interview was lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

## **Q: How might Illinois be impacted by Consolidated Interim Storage, or long-term storage in Yucca Mountain?**

We’ll be 100 percent impacted on [the transportation issue](#) – since as much as 80 percent of the high-level waste going to Yucca Mountain is expected to go through Illinois by rail or truck. And it’s possible there would be barge shipments of radioactive waste on Lake Michigan from [closed reactors in] Wisconsin and Michigan. Beyond that we don’t know about the wild card proposal that Illinois would be an ideal location for a CIS site, as the Oak Ridge study indicated. If the ones in Texas and New Mexico don’t work out, who knows what the rest of the short list would look like.

## **Q: Is nuclear being seen more and more as an environmental justice issue?**

Nuclear has always been an environmental justice issue. It's just that it gets overwhelmed by the more obvious ones in the fossil fuel industry. When you have coal mines that collapse and workers that get killed and black lung disease to contend with and coal ash ponds rupturing, that's all pretty obvious stuff. But beyond the dramatic, the very subtle aspects of how nuclear communities are impacted are virtually the same as fossil fuels. You have the uranium industry contaminating water supplies in the Southwest, indigenous land. One of my colleagues, a Dine [Navajo] activist, said you might find an old coal miner, but you will never find an old uranium miner. They know first-hand what the impacts of uranium have been on their communities.

Whenever the industry needed a waste dump, one of the first places they'd turn would be a Native American tribe. When you have nothing and someone promises you money and jobs, what do you do? Now we have the fact that nuclear plants are closing and no one is talking about an exit plan.

**Q: How about in the Midwest, is nuclear an environmental justice issue here?**

Not so much in terms of indigenous tribes, but in terms of some of the communities affected. For one example, the [Palisades reactor](#) in Covert, Michigan, which has a [sizable low-income and] black community. When you have a nuclear facility and it closes and not only kills your economy, what does it do to the real estate market, are you able to sell your home? That transcends people of color and minorities, it's truly a class and economic issue which is an environmental justice issue as well.

When you look at the rail routes that would be used for transporting these materials, you see they are virtually identical to the ones being [pummeled by the oil train](#) derailments – rural communities, communities that might not have a first-rate emergency responders program, the communities the rail industry abandoned a century ago. These are the folks in line to deal with any accidents that occur. And even through urban centers, you look where the rail routes go, largely through minority communities.

**Q: There's increasing focus on a just transition for coal communities, both coal mining areas and municipalities with coal-fired power plants. Is just transition a concept being pushed around nuclear too?**

It's just in its beginning stages. Legislators are finally waking up to the fact that it's the same issue, just a different energy resource that has to be dealt with. They're understanding with fossil fuels and nuclear, something has to be done proactively, communities have to be taken care of proactively. New York is grappling with it because of the [closure of Indian Point](#) – they're seeing some of the problems with decommissioning, not having an oversight board and the issue of economic redevelopment. This is being examined, though it hasn't gelled nationally yet. But we're in the beginning stages of having a movement. On the select issue of orphaned waste, there is the national legislation Tammy Duckworth sponsored out there to deal with communities that are stuck with waste, that didn't sign up 40 years ago to be a radioactive waste dump. [U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL) is a co-sponsor of the [The Stranded Act of 2017 \(S. 1903\)](#), which would authorize \$100 million over seven years to compensate communities storing high-level radioactive waste after reactors close.]

**Q: So how do things look in Zion, Illinois, one of those towns dealing with a nuclear closed plant and orphaned waste?**

Zion could easily become the national poster child of everything that could go wrong. When [then-owner] ComEd abruptly without any warning and unilaterally closed the Zion reactor in 1998, the community of Zion lost 75 percent of its tax base overnight. It lost a sizable portion of their workforce, and with a reduced tax base they had to raise taxes which drove businesses and people away, and caused a housing crisis in the sense of abandonments...and they're still stuck with reactive waste. Not even Donald Trump is stupid enough to open a hotel next to that.

**Q: What do you think should be done with nuclear waste in places like Zion?**

Environmental groups came together in 2002 to come up with a national proposal for what should be done with radioactive waste, and that applies to Zion. First, stop making it. To begin with, our motto is don't just do something, stand there. Safeguard it, use hardened on-site storage. That's immediate, you have to do that now regardless of what happens. Protect the communities you have damaged, that's an obligation. Number two, you do not invest in CIS in other states. All that does is create more waste sites that have to be abandoned and cleaned up, and that doubles the transportation problem, because you have to move it again if and when you get long-term disposal.

The third thing, Yucca Mountain is not a credible, valid and protective site for storage of highly radioactive nuclear waste. So you have to create a new process outside of politics, genuinely scientifically based [to find a different long-term storage site]. You'll have to deal with the minefield of local consent later. But at least do the credible science first which never happened at Yucca Mountain.

**Q: You've said before that you think the push for Consolidated Interim Storage is linked to nuclear generators' push for [supports](#) from ratepayers, what critics call bailouts. How is that the case?**

To us the linkage has been clear for years. It's being played out now in public and rationalized in different ways. The industry is looking to be absolved of its past sin of not having a solution [for waste]. If it has a solution then it can keep running for years. The bailout is inextricably linked to the waste issue – the solution to one plays into the other.

**Q: In Illinois, most environmental and clean energy groups ended up supporting the state's energy law even though it included the [supports for Exelon's nuclear plants](#). But the Nuclear Energy Information Service opposed the bill to the end, and called for communities with closing power plants to be "bailed out" rather than the nuclear plants. What does that mean in practice? Who should be "bailing out" the communities – ratepayers, or companies?**

In letters to Governor [Bruce] Rauner and 40 other legislators, we made the case it's the communities that should be bailed out, not profitable corporations. There's nothing in the state constitution that mandates the legislature guarantee the profits of a private company. Any community needs to have a piggy bank for a rainy day. To the extent the communities didn't prepare [for possible plant closures], that's partly on them. You're going to have to have a really tough conversation with all the parties, and everyone is going to have to pony up into the fund. We have suggestions on ways to do that. Whether it is stated in law or not, the ethical and moral thing is that company-town employers have a bigger obligation to do something when they leave than a mom and pop store would. They come in with all kinds of promises that rarely are met and leave a big mess that doesn't get cleaned up.

**Q: In Illinois or nationally, do you maintain that nuclear plants are not in fact needed for energy security?**

Absolutely not. We have a surplus of power, the grid is operating quite fine. We got through that Arctic plunge of a few years ago. While nuclear [proponents] brags about how available they were [[during the Polar Vortex of 2014](#)], no one looks into how available renewables were and they were quite available. We would posit that solar will be there for 3.5 billion years and beyond.

**Q: What about wind, should Illinois' Future Energy Jobs Act have done more to incentivize wind energy?**

It was a tough legislative fight to get what we got. In retrospect, solar made out well and wind didn't. Wind could have been more prolific and widespread [if the law emphasized it more], but it didn't. Because realistically it was the main competitor to Exelon's nuclear plants and no one wanted to take that on. You talk about resilience and reliability, a renewable infrastructure gives you the ability to incrementally add and

subtract what you need, you can decide how many wind turbines to build or to run. With a nuclear plant you get 1000 megawatts or nothing.

## **ABOUT KARI LYDERSEN**



Kari has written for Midwest Energy News since January 2011. She is an author and journalist who worked for the Washington Post's Midwest bureau from 1997 through 2009. Her work has also appeared in the New York Times, Chicago News Cooperative, Chicago Reader and other publications.