

Meetings on nuke-dump testing tense

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intense than before. Members of the anti-dump-site group, Nuclear Waste Task Force, said the reason is that some local businesses expect to profit from the repository testing.

Farmers fear the dump could contaminate the groundwater essential for irrigation and could taint the public's perception of crops grown here. Holly Sugar Corp. and Frito-Lay Inc. have threatened to stop buying local crops if the repository is built in Deaf Smith County.

But a Texas Department of Agriculture poll in 1985 found 35 percent of local business owners polled thought the repository testing might be "a good thing for your business"; 49 percent thought testing would be bad for business; 16 percent weren't sure. The poll was based on 380 telephone interviews and had a margin of error of plus or minus four percentage points.

"The rural people feel like we have been a big help over the years to support Amarillo and Hereford because we bring a lot of business there," said Lois Wales of Women Involved in Farm Economics, during a Wednesday news conference. "We feel like we are being slapped down for a few dollars that they think they may gain. They've forgotten the heritage."

Ms. Wales' group, the Texas Corn Growers Association and the Texas Sugar Beet Producers donated a total of \$25,000 to the Nuclear Waste Task Force this week to help finance a legal challenge to the dump site testing program.

"We feel that you are letting us down now, and we are going to boycott and not come to your cities anymore if this kind of leadership continues," Ms. Wales said.

Department of Energy officials tried to meet with local landowners in Vega on Monday afternoon. But most of the farmers walked out of the meeting after their lawyer asked for a written list of the land the department plans to use for "site characterization." Project director Neff said that list couldn't be developed until later this year.

"The landowners do not wish to sit in endless meetings where they receive no information," lawyer Alice Hector told reporters outside the meeting hall. "They have no

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— Alice Hector, landowners' lawyer

new information to give to anyone."

Ms. Hector said landowners need the list to plan for their businesses. Instead, she said, they get "information very quickly, in an oral setting. What has happened continuously is that people have asked questions and the response is, 'We don't know the answer, we'll send it to you,' and then they never receive it. It's very rude."

Neff said that it is still too early in the testing program to know specifically which land will be needed.

"Our intent was to try to work over the next four months with the individual landowners, trying to learn the impact on picking that spot," Neff said. "I think that they're basically saying to us, some of them anyway, that they don't want to work with us. Unfortunately that isn't an option for us. We have to move forward."

While the Vega and Hereford meetings quickly turned into show-downs, the Amarillo public session turned into a battle between audience members themselves. The tense mood seen in the earlier sessions was not seen in Amarillo. Boos and cheers seemed equally loud as a dump site proponent rose to make his statement.

"We're glad you're here!" said signmaker F.H. Jonas to widespread applause and catcalls.

Jonas was the only businessman to take a public stand at the meeting.

"It's almost like a McCarthy situation," Jonas said. "They're afraid to stand up and speak because they're afraid to lose their customers."

Things went much more smoothly during the string of briefings with local government officials. Deputy project director Robert Wunderlich explained the dump site testing schedule and how the program might affect the town of

"The smaller groups actually give the local representatives a better opportunity to ask questions," Wunderlich said. "It's a more efficient way to exchange information."

Spokeswoman McClain said the department has studied the potential for violence as the testing program begins.

"It really is not expected," she said. "The threats are there, but we've heard them in other states also — much worse than here."



Special to The Dallas Morning News: Terry FitzPatrick

Ralph Diller speaks his mind at a meeting with Energy Department officials.

Dump-test meetings tense

Panhandle residents' emotions high at nuke-waste sessions

By Terry FitzPatrick
Special to The News

AMARILLO, Texas — Angry Panhandle residents spoke of lynching scientists who plan to test part of Deaf Smith County for America's first highly radioactive nuclear waste dump, as the U.S. Department of Energy explained the testing program during a series of public meetings this week.

Frustrated farmers walked out of one session with federal officials and began to talk about an economic boycott of businesses that support dump site testing.

Deaf Smith County is one of three sites scheduled for \$1 billion worth of testing over the next five to seven years. The Energy Department plans to move 100 workers to the area to test bedrock and study how an underground nuclear waste repository would affect the region's economy.

The proposed nuclear waste dump has split area residents, according to a Texas Department of Agriculture survey, released this month. It showed 36 percent of Amarillo residents polled support testing in the Panhandle for the dump; 59 percent oppose testing; 6 percent aren't sure. The poll was based on 219 telephone interviews and had a margin of error of plus or minus four percentage points.

This week, the Energy Department



NUCLEAR WASTE TASK FORCE

Some dump site foes showed their feelings on stickers.

held town-hall meetings in Amarillo, Hereford and Vega, as well as about a dozen smaller briefings with local government officials and chambers of commerce. The small sessions were calm and productive, but the mass meetings quickly turned into confrontations between federal officials and angry crowds.

Outside the Hereford Community Center, an effigy of a Department of Energy worker swung in the breeze, while inside, an overflow crowd of 800 badgered dump site project director Jeff Neff.

"I think the people here would like to climb right in your face and tell you what they think of you and do what is happening outside, the effigy hanging

in a tree," declared farmer Ralph Diller.

Afterward, Energy Department spokeswoman Linda McClain said letting residents vent their frustrations was part of the plan.

"That's very important," Ms. McClain said. "I think people suspect we don't welcome criticism, and that's not true. A program like this benefits greatly from our critics. Ultimately, we have to build public confidence, ensure that people think this project is safe. And we can't do that unless we understand what their concerns and fears are."

But the emotions during this latest round of public forums seemed more Please see MEETINGS on Page 40A.