

I Remember LLW Disposal

Decades ago, in another era, I had the pleasure of playing “Mama” in the high school senior class play, *I Remember Mama*. Those familiar with this drama, or the book *Mama's Bank Account* on which it was based, know that the story deals with the life of a Norwegian family in early 20th-century San Francisco. (Being no Meryl Streep, I am sure my “Norwegian” accent ranged between ghastly and nonexistent.)

In the play, Mama often talks of the bank account the family has at a large downtown bank. However, whenever a financial crisis arises (Papa goes on strike, son Nels wants to go to high school, little Dagmar needs surgery), Mama finds another way to dig up the necessary money, because “We do not want to have to go to the bank.” Years later, it transpires that there never *was* a bank account; Mama had invented it to provide the children with a sense of security. We'll get back to this idea in a little while.

I am also old enough to remember when the Low-Level Radioactive Waste Policy Act of 1980 was passed. (Remember 1980? Jimmy Carter was still president, and the nation was transfixed with “who shot J.R.?”) A few years later we got the Low-Level Radioactive Waste Policy Amendments Act of 1985. Both these bills were attempts by Congress to “solve” the low-level waste disposal crisis in the United States at the time. The crisis? There were three LLW disposal facilities operating in the country, and the states hosting those facilities were tired of being the “dumping ground” of the whole nation. They wanted a more equitable method of disposing of LLW.

Congress wrote and passed a law that on paper seemed quite sensible. Individual states would be responsible for the LLW generated within

their borders, so individual states would have to find a solution. However, because the nation really didn't need 50 LLW disposal facilities, states were encouraged to join together with other states to form compacts. A compact would designate a host state, and that host state would develop and license an LLW disposal facility. LLW generators located in the compact states would have access to that facility, and the compact would, if it so wished, keep out any LLW generated outside the compact states.

Alas, the law never really worked in actuality as it had on paper. Yes, many states got together and formed compacts—10 at last counting. But today, 27 years later, no host state has licensed and developed an LLW disposal facility. (For a look at where we are today in LLW disposal, see “Low-Level Radioactive Waste Disposal: Are We Having a Crisis Yet?” this issue, page 10.)

As it became apparent over the years that the compact system was clearly and significantly flawed, compact representatives and officials defended the system. “This is the system Congress has made,” they would say, “and Congress doesn't want to revisit this issue. Whatever happens, you do not want to have to go to Congress.”

It took me a while to realize this, but *of course* compact representatives would say this. The compact system has given them jobs, and it is “protecting” the current disposal sites. *Of course* they don't want Congress to revisit the issue. But it's been a generation since the first law passed, and most of the people in today's Congress were not around in 1980. To them, it's a new issue.

So, getting back to Mama and her bank account, maybe this time we *must* go to the bank. LLW generators



*It's time to
go to the
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have done about everything possible within the current law to try to keep disposal capacity open. Maybe it's time to *demand* that Congress take another look at the issue. Some industry representatives are afraid of politicizing the issue—of having it become as contentious as spent fuel. Well, I have news for them—it already is! Remember Ward Valley (the California LLW disposal site scuttled by national politics)?

I'm not a politician and I'm not an industry expert. I am just a person who enjoys the privilege of buying ink by the barrel, so to speak. The current LLW disposal system is a disaster, and it's time something was done about it. The only entity that can address the issue effectively is Congress, and it's time for Congress to do it.—Nancy J. Zacha, Editor