FEDS STALLED, NUCLEAR WASTE HERE INDEFINITELY: OP-ED

The heat is oppressive. I turn on my air conditioner. The electricity flows in from Millstone Nuclear Power near Niantic, where high-level radioactive waste steadily accumulates on the shore of Long Island Sound.

Why? Because there's nowhere else to put it. Why? A political failure no less tragi-comic than our failure on immigration policy.

Immigration cannot be left up to the states because, once inside the U.S., an immigrant can freely move from one to the other. Ditto for the disposal of high-level radioactive waste. An accident or terrorist act in one state can freely move dangerous radionuclides to another, for example, across Long Island Sound from Connecticut to New York.

The U.S. came to terms with this reality three decades ago when Congress passed the Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982, mandating the Department of Energy to begin development, construction and management of a permanent geological repository to house the nation's waste. Since then, the department has accomplished little except to spend your money, being gathered as a hidden surcharge on your electric bill. Since 1983, ratepayers in 36 nuclear-powered states have contributed more than $17 billion.

By 1987, after five years of intense and fair national scrutiny that included the possibility of crystalline rocks in New England, they selected Yucca Mountain in Nevada as the best site. Its selection was part of a congressional amendment that scheduled the arrival of waste shipments beginning 1998. We're now 14 years behind that deadline and going nowhere fast because licensing for Yucca Mountain was abruptly halted in 2010.

This was a consequence of a 2009 decision by President Barack Obama, prompted by campaign promises he made in 2008. During his campaign, the Senate majority leader was Democrat Harry Reid who -- quoting his official website -- "has fought tirelessly to make Nevada an even better place to live by ... fighting the proposed Yucca Mountain nuclear waste dump." Reid had no choice because -- as a matter of general principle -- his constituents are no happier with a nuclear waste dump in their backyards than we would be.

With the repository search going nowhere, Dominion, the owner of Connecticut's Millstone Plants has no choice but to ask state residents to keep this dangerous waste in a place where the best-case scenario is far worse than Yucca Mountain's worst-case scenario. And we have no choice because our national politicians chickened out on a tough decision. So, this fall, Dominion will ask the Connecticut Siting Council for permission to build a facility to hold 135 concrete-and-steel casks to store -- for many decades -- dangerous waste, which should instead be going deep underground in the empty desert. A similar storage facility already exists at the site of the former Connecticut Yankee Power Plant in Haddam.

Some good news. Earlier this summer, a U.S. Court of Appeals in Washington, D.C., handed down a landmark ruling that the NRC had failed to do its job when they forced the states to let nuclear waste pile up at places such as Millstone. Turmoil in the agency led to the resignation of its former director and appointment of new chairman, Allison MacFarlane. Professionally, she's got great credentials, a geologist and environmental science professor at George Mason University in Washington, D.C. Technically, she's been a critic of the Yucca Mountain facility. Politically, she served in the Obama administration as a member of his expert commission on nuclear waste, and was the choice of -- guess who? -- Harry Reid.
About a month ago, a federal judicial panel in Washington balked in a split decision on whether to force the NRC to restart the licensing of the Yucca Mountain site.

Meanwhile, more than 70,000 metric tons of high-level waste sit in so-called temporary sites all across America. Temporary, that is, until at least 2045. This includes Connecticut's heavily populated, economically important, water-rich, geologically complex and ecologically diverse backyard.

Our national leaders have failed us. This political theater isn't funny. It's dangerous.