THIS STATE’S NO PLACE FOR NUCLEAR WASTE:

Yucca Mountain -- a desolate, dry volcanic ridge in Nevada -- is not "Yuck-a Mountain." It's a fine place to store our nation's high-level radioactive waste to protect the environment, especially from terrorist attack.

Permanent disposal at Yucca Mountain -- in deep tunnels carved below its parched desert landscape -- is much, much safer than current temporary storage along the wet, exposed, watery shores of Haddam Neck, on the Connecticut River, and of Waterford, bounded by the Niantic and Thames rivers and Long Island Sound, where the stockpile of radioactive waste lies waiting, waiting, waiting.

We can wait no longer. Credible threats to nuclear power plants and the prospect of so-called dirty bombs have raised the stakes on this issue, which now requires a political solution rather than a geological or a technical one.

A political solution is what took place 15 years ago, when the federal government abandoned its search for a high-level waste dump near the Rhode Island border. A political solution is also what happened 10 years ago, when Connecticut experienced its own miniature version of the Yucca Mountain controversy: A rounded hill along Frog Hollow Road in Ellington -- then proposed as the best candidate for a low-level radioactive waste dump -- was deemed unacceptable.

Like other states, Connecticut has no trouble creating radioactive waste. Like other states, it has difficulty getting rid of it. The problem is that everyone is looking for the perfect site. But looking for the perfect disposal site for radioactive waste is like looking for the perfect person: Both exist as fantasy, neither exists in reality. Every candidate disposal site or person will be blemished in some way, perhaps with a water-bearing fracture or an ugly wart, respectively.

Yucca Mountain emerged as a finalist not because it was perfect, but because -- after intense scrutiny -- it had fewer warts than other candidate sites, most of which were culled in the first round.

Connecticut's first brush with nuclear waste, called the Crystalline Repository Project, happened in the mid-1980s. This federal initiative sought a permanent home for the state's (and region's) high-level radioactive waste in masses of granitic rock. Allowing disposal in such rock, it was thought, would permit disposal in the northeastern United States, which would eliminate the national anxiety over long-distance transport on interstate highway and rail corridors, and would lessen the political fallout associated with having a single repository for all of the nation's waste in the backyard of one state.

To guard against federal hegemony in the selection process, each state and Native American tribe was funded to carry out its own investigation of federally selected sites within its borders. Luckily for us, Congress came to its senses, realizing that candidate sites in the Northeast were too wet and too close to population centers and their bedrock was too fractured. This was bad news for the arid, geologically simpler, less populated southwestern states, and for the heartland states through which waste would be transported. They knew it then, and they really know it now.

Connecticut's second brush with radioactive waste disposal was its search for a low-level radioactive waste disposal site in the late 1980s. This came about because the federal government was politically unable to create regional disposal sites to which a dozen or more states might contribute. In retaliation, Congress forced each state to come up with its own plan, either to locate its own
facility or to participate in an interstate compact in which several states might share the burden with a single facility.

Unwilling to take the waste from adjacent states and unable to convince them to take ours, Connecticut had no choice but to search for its own site. We then spent three years creating an open-ended, scientific process in which quantitative siting criteria -- rather than people -- made the final selection as part of a politically blind process. After a month's worth of front-page stories, however, Connecticut's version of Yucca Mountain was tossed out, ostensibly on the basis of a methodological glitch.

But everyone involved knew that the site was tossed out for political reasons. First, it was clear from the outset that no place in Connecticut would approach the geological simplicity of the flat-lying strata of black shale of upstate New York. Nor did it help that the Ellington site lay within the district of John Larson, then president of the state Senate and now congressman from the 1st District.

But Connecticut's successes in avoiding nuclear dumps come at the cost of our national failures to solve the problem. Yucca Mountain must succeed, if only as a place to hold and protect our dangerous waste before we find a better solution.

To this extent, Yucca Mountain -- warts and all -- is a better solution than the heavily populated banks of Connecticut's waterways.