TIME'S A-WASTING: GET GOING ON YUCCA MOUNTAIN:

Homeland security involves more than the threat of terrorism. It also involves the environmental threat posed by the temporary storage of high-level radioactive waste at sites throughout the United States, several of which are near New England rivers. The sooner we get our high-level waste into permanent storage the better.

On our side of the North Pacific Ocean, the Bush administration is pushing forward to license a disposal site at Yucca Mountain, about 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas. Though the site is blemished with minor geological details, it has emerged from a prolonged search as the nation's best candidate for storing high-level radioactive waste. It's a good place for disposal because the terrain is desolate and dry, contains fairly uniform underground rock formations and isn't prone to great earthquakes. And for extra safety, the waste will be placed in metal alloy containers protected by titanium drip shields in deep underground tunnels, hermetically sealed by dry rock. That's safe enough for me. I agree with Bush on moving forward with licensing.

On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, Japan is searching for its own high-level waste site in a setting so bad that it makes Yucca Mountain seem ideal. First, the population density of Japan makes that of central Nevada look like outer space. Second, Japanese bedrock is the furthest thing from the bone-dry, layer-cake stuff found above the ancient crust at Yucca Mountain. Instead, it's a melange of mud, sand, volcanic ash and lava that has been stretched, squeezed and sheared like gray dough between two of Earth's great tectonic plates. Near the surface, the Japanese landscape is fractured by tens of thousands of earthquake faults. Also, Japan is a rainy place, with typhoons and tsunamis. Finally, and worst of all, Japan has more than 300 volcanoes that have been active in the recent geological past.

In spite of its greater technical challenges, Japan is moving forward while the U.S. process continues to stall. For example, a recent federal court ruling will force the Environmental Protection Agency to develop a new radiation standard, one that will delay the license application for at least two more years.

There are good reasons for not putting U.S. waste at Yucca Mountain. Nevada shouldn't be forced to take all the nation's waste. Native Americans are opposed to violating land they consider sacred. Most important, there is the real risk of waste leakage under wetter conditions someday. But the sum of all these problems pales when compared to the much larger problem of continued storage of such waste in more vulnerable surface stockpiles.

Perhaps Hollywood can help solve this political deadlock. Remember the 1979 nuclear disaster movie "The China Syndrome," starring Jane Fonda, Michael Douglas and Jack Lemmon? It was released in the same year as the partial meltdown at Three Mile Island in Pennsylvania. Perhaps it's time for a sequel, "The Japan Syndrome." My script begins with a shattering earthquake that opens up a new underground conduit for molten lava. The liquid rock then moves upward, swallowing the canisters of Japan's underground waste as if they were so many peanuts. Then, in a powerful volcanic eruption, the molten waste is belched as ash into Earth's stratosphere. Radioactive fallout then dusts Earth for years, leading to medical toil and trouble.

Hold the alarm! My story is complete fiction -- a hyper-exaggerated worst-case scenario. Why? Because even in Japan there are plenty of fairly stable, fairly predictable sites and enough good engineers, materials scientists, geologists and policy-makers to ensure that a waste facility would be well designed, even in the Pacific's Ring of Fire. The real threat on both sides of the Pacific is doing
nothing as the waste keeps piling up in facilities that are less secure environmentally and more exposed to terrorism.

Japan's forward progress should take some steam from those who would have the U.S. government drag its feet forever. With no other site in the United States being considered, Yucca now is better than Yucca later.