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It's time for the nuclear trash man to show up

Web posted Sunday, May 26, 2002

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By **Damon Cline**
Business Editor

Imagine it's trash day at your home and the garbage truck doesn't show up.

When you call the hauler to ask why, you're informed it has run out of places to dump your trash. But, the company says, the problem should be solved in time for the next scheduled pickup.

Fair enough. You can just keep the trash over by the garage until next week.

Next week comes and there's still no truck. You call again and the excuse remains the same: Just another week and we'll have it all figured out.

But the same thing happens week after week. Then one day you climb over the festering heap to check your mail. Inside the mailbox is your bill for trash service.

Of course, no individual would tolerate that sort of scenario, but the generators of nuclear waste have been putting up with it since 1982. That's when the federal government, through the Nuclear Waste Policy Act, pledged to build a permanent national disposal site by 1989.

The deadline came and went, and the nuclear trash continued piling up in 39 states as the waste repository project moved at the speed of government.

But this summer, after years of excuses and billions of dollars, the Senate is poised to give the final approval to a remote site in the Nevada desert known as Yucca Mountain.

Folks around here should hope for a thumbs up, because the Augusta-Aiken area is home to two generators of nuclear waste - the Alvin W. Vogtle Electric Generating Plant and Savannah River Site.

Plant Vogtle, like all nuclear power plants, has been forced to store its spent uranium fuel rods on-site in steel-reinforced concrete "pools" of water. The pools are safe, but they were never designed to be a permanent solution.

Fortunately, nuclear reactors do not produce high volumes of waste. When 2010 rolls around, Vogtle's two reactors will have only produced enough spent fuel to fill a two-car garage.

Savannah River Site, on the other hand, is home to 37 million gallons of high-level radioactive waste, byproducts of the plutonium and tritium the facility produced for nuclear weapons during the Cold War. The waste is kept in canisters on-site.

With Yucca Mountain a reality, the facility estimates it will be rid of all high-level waste by 2028.

Keep your fingers crossed. If the Senate says the best place for radioactive waste is indeed 1,000 feet below the Nevada desert, then the nuclear garbage truck could begin making stops at Plant Vogtle and Savannah River Site as early as 2010.

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