

SUCCESSFUL STUDENT SUPPORT FOR RESPONSIBLE RADIOACTIVE WASTE DISPOSAL IN TEXAS

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ABSTRACT

Knowing that Texas State policy on low-level radioactive waste has been stagnant for more than twenty years, the members of the Student Chapter of Advocates for Responsible Disposal in Texas (ARDT) took up the gauntlet and decided to make a difference during the recent legislative session. They trained to communicate technical information to non-technical people, to testify in legislative hearings and to respond to questions with diplomacy and technical accuracy. These students, too young to be elected or to hold key positions in agencies, nevertheless made a powerful impact on the officials who heard their testimony. As a result of this public support, the legislation was passed.

INTRODUCTION

Advocates for Responsible Disposal in Texas (ARDT) was formed in 1994 to support the State of Texas in its efforts to identify, evaluate, and after thorough public input, establish a system that will manage and ultimately provide permanent disposal of low level radioactive waste. This has been accomplished through providing information to the public, decision-makers, educators, scientists, and physicians about the need for, and merits of, a system for managing the waste safely and developing a facility for permanent disposal. ARDT also has provided a forum through which advocates for such a system and facility can demonstrate their support.

The ARDT Student Chapter was established in 2002 with this same purpose as its guiding principle and has provided a fresh approach to a standard problem. Too many individuals who are involved in the low-level waste disposal issue have developed a cynical view of this issue and the students added a vibrancy and excitement that is sorely absent. Unlike their anti-nuclear counterparts, these students relied on their technical background when responding to technical questions. These students took their time to research, cultivate an expertise on the issue of low-level radioactive waste disposal, and develop a response based on sound technical data.

ACTION

Before the current legislation, the issue of a Low Level Radioactive Waste disposal facility was inactive. A facility had been proposed, but the legislation was eliminated in 1999. Since then, the need for disposal has made itself more prevalent and advocacy has increased. It was at this point that the generators of radioactive waste formed ARDT to support the cause. The ARDT membership is made up of representatives from the energy, medical and university research communities, such as Texas A&M and The University of Texas. Membership is welcome from all interested individuals and organizations that share ARDT's goals.

A natural extension of this group was an ARDT Student Chapter borne out of a Nuclear Engineering Technical Communications class at Texas A&M University. Students in the course developed a well-rounded education, including studying public policy issues and effective ways to communicate to decision-makers. They also explored, and developed an understanding of, low-level radioactive waste disposal. These students took a special course in communication to learn how to talk about nuclear energy and nuclear waste with people who are not scientific and technical professionals. Following this, they were trained in how to testify before legislative committees. The students enrolled in a class called *Technical Communications in Nuclear Engineering* (NUEN 431), taught by Dr. Ian Hamilton, who also serves as the Faculty Advisor for the ARDT Student Chapter. Professor Hamilton conducts this class to teach nuclear engineering and radiological health engineering students how to distill a scientific message to any kind of audience through effective written or oral communication. Emphasis was also placed on the importance of active listening in communication to develop diplomacy. Communicating to state legislators and their staffs seemed a perfect extension for this class. To a point beyond what was expected, students got interested and involved in the waste disposal issue.

The students appeared before the House Environmental Regulations Committee and Senate Natural Resources Committee hearings during the recent session of the Texas Legislature, leaving several committee members stunned that the young people in the audience were not anti-nuclear protestors, but instead were supportive and completely knowledgeable. Specifically, they testified on behalf of the development of a low-level radioactive waste disposal facility, illustrating that young people are willing to stand up and support finding a solution to our low level waste dilemma. Their appearance at the Committee hearings reflected the fact that they were willing to speak out about their future. Legislators found it refreshing to see young faces with a positive and innovative approach to this issue and a readiness to work on a solution. Under tough questioning, the students were able to offer thoughtful answers. They spent a considerable amount of time researching the legislative process in order to develop a better understanding of the policy issues surrounding low-level radioactive waste disposal. They also were required to research the overall legislative process at the Capitol and practice their public speaking skills. The students received a healthy return on their investment of time and energy.

Student advocacy was accomplished through a number of channels. The primary method was testifying before Senate and House of Representatives committee meetings. In addition to this, the group urged its members to write letters to their appropriate senators and representatives. In the public arena, students kept abreast of public opinion and articles in local media. The Student Chapter was encouraged to publicly stand up for nuclear technology and responsible waste management. It must be recognized that advocacy is not primarily focused on legislative proceedings. Advocacy must be wide and far-reaching in order to accomplish its goals. By educating teachers, physicians, or anyone with whom they have contact, students get the word out to the public, which is an important venue when it comes to matters of public policy.

The actions of these students can and should be replicated by other students and young professionals in the waste management industry. Plans to replicate this program are under consideration, specifically in other Texas schools and perhaps in other states. These students represent the industry's future. Their optimism and positive attitude is refreshing. Several people in the nuclear industry have expressed their happiness to see that young people are willing to take on challenges in order to make our industry thrive and prosper. If we want to be able to pursue innovations in technology and management, we need to be able to communicate compelling reasons for them and the benefits of having them.

CONCLUSION

The importance of this program as a learning opportunity cannot be overstated. While proficient in nuclear analysis, dose calculations, and the like, many of the students had never considered the public relations aspect of the nuclear field. Many scoff when the media makes wild claims as to the absolutely demonic impact of “deadly radiation.” Whose responsibility is it, then, to stand up and make the science known? ARDT has this point as its goal and introduced students to the new world of politics and public education. Another interesting point was the response from anti-nuclear activists. While some of them are hostile towards pro-nuclear individuals, they had no problems with the students. It seems that having young citizens standing up for nuclear technology seemed innovative to them as well. They were much more receptive to a message delivered by someone whom they did not perceive as having an agenda.

These students represent tomorrow’s leaders in the nuclear energy industry. They will require experience in engineering, as well as public policy. Giving the students an opportunity to participate in the legislative process offers them a glimpse of an important facet of radioactive waste management. Public student support also contributes a new approach to a lingering problem.