The Sierra Blanca Proposed Nuclear Waste Site Collection

Language of Material: English

Contributing Institution: Archives of the Big Bend

Title: Sierra Blanca Proposed Nuclear Waste Site Collection

Creator: Susan Curry

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Date (inclusive): 1984 - 2001

Date (bulk): 1996-1999

Abstract: The Sierra Blanca Proposed Nuclear Waste Site Collection documents the grassroots movement to put a halt to the Vermont-Maine Compact, legislation which proposed to use part of the Faskin Ranch in Sierra Blanca, Hudspeth County, Texas, as a low-level nuclear waste dumping ground. By August 1996, after a public hearing in Sierra Blanca, a unified effort began in order to put a stop to the proposed waste site. The Sierra Blanca Collection documents this grassroots effort, which culminated in a judicial block to stop the waste site in 1998. The collection also contains information on other environmental campaigns local to the Big Bend region such as Tourists Not Trucks and Blue Skies Over Big Bend. The Sierra Blanca Collection contains many newspaper articles related to the proposed nuclear waste site in Sierra Blanca, chronology and timelines, fact sheets and other information on Sierra Blanca. It also contains research materials related to nuclear waste in general, nuclear accidents such as Chernobyl, and other nuclear waste sites. The collection also contains legislative files regarding the Sierra Blanca hearings, correspondence, cartoons, and ephemera.


Physical Location: N 102 3A - N 103-3C

Access

This collection is open for research.

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Preferred Citation

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Organizational History

Interest in designating Sierra Blanca as a nuclear waste site began in 1994 with the creation of the first Texas-Maine-Vermont Nuclear Compact (H.R. 558). H.R. 558 proposed to create a low-level nuclear waste site in Sierra Blanca, Hudspeth County, Texas. The Sierra Blanca Legal Defense fund was started in 1994 for the purpose of stopping the Texas Natural Resources Conservation Commission (TNRCC) from granting a license for the proposed radioactive waste dump. H.R. 558 was struck down by the U.S. House of Representatives 243-176 in September, 1995.

The following year, a new Texas-Maine-Vermont Nuclear Compact (H.R. 629) was drafted to be almost identical to H.R. 558. In addition to allowing Texas, Maine, and Vermont to dispose of nuclear waste in Sierra Blanca, it allowed for an appointed commission to create a contract with any nuclear waste disposal authority in the country. Opponents argued that H.R. 629 would create a toxic waste dumping ground for the entire country. More than 500 people showed up for the first public forum in Sierra Blanca on August 6, 1996 in a crowded school gymnasium to voice their opinions against the Compact. From this initial meeting, 21 regional individuals and organizations stepped up to petition on behalf of the community of Sierra Blanca, and the hundreds of thousands of people whose lives could have potentially been adversely affected on both sides of the border by the creation of the nuclear waste site. Some of these activists included: Bill Addington, Susan and Tom Curry, Maiya Keck, and the Judd Foundation.

A two-year legal and publicity battle ensued to put a halt to the nuclear waste site. Activists argued that the waste site proposal was environmental racism since there were only 1,200 registered voters in Hudspeth county, one of the poorest counties in Texas with 67 percent of the population identifying as Mexican American. 40 percent of the citizens of Sierra Blanca lived in poverty. Opponents of the dump also argued that the location of the site was not safe, being on a geologically unstable earthquake zone where 64 earthquakes with magnitudes of 3.0 or greater have occurred within 200 miles of the site within the last 70 years (as of 1998). In addition, activists were very concerned by the threat of leakage from the radioactive material. They cited studies where all six nuclear waste sites located in the United States have leaked or are currently leaking. The potential leakage could seep into the West Texas Bolson Aquifer, the primary fresh water source to the 500,000 people in the El Paso metropolitan area. Finally, activists argued that the dump was against the 1983 La Paz Agreement which stated that the U.S. and Mexico agree not to site radioactive waste dumps within 60 miles of the border.

In 1998, as the deadline for the commissioner’s vote on the waste site approached, activists ramped up their outreach campaign to stop the dump. By then, the Mexican National Chamber of Deputies unanimously passed a resolution against the Sierra Blanca dump. The Mexican state congresses of Coahuila and Chihuahua, and 19 counties and 10 cities in Texas also signed resolutions against the dump. The dump was getting negative publicity from Sierra Blanca Rancher Bill Addington’s long-term hunger strike. In addition, 3000 children from El Valle de Juarez, an area in Mexico close to Sierra Blanca, blocked the International Bridge and several leaders from both El Paso and Juarez staged a hunger strike in protest. Using donations from the Big Bend community, Susan Curry, Gary Oliver, and Hal Flanders organized a trip to Vermont where they would speak with legislators such as Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and Governor
Howard Dean in opposition to the dump. Their trip was documented by journalist Amy Goodman and included participation in the Vermont Walk for Nuclear Abolition.

On October 22, 1998, a panel of three commissioners from the Texas Natural Resources Conservation Commission unanimously voted to deny a crucial permit necessary for the creation of the dump, citing safety as its primary reason due to the nearby geological fault. Activist Susan Curry stated that the Sierra Blanca movement would not have been successful were it not for the unification of people from all sides of the political spectrum. This included a combined effort from organizations such as ACES, The West Texas Aligned Group, the Sierra Blanca Defense Fund, and the Trans-Pecos Heritage Association. Curry also stresses the importance of the legal work from the Sierra Blanca Defense Fund, and musicians such as Butch Hancock, Steve Brooks, Bonnie Raitt, the Dayjobs, and many others. Funding began to flow after the performances. Curry emphasized that the movement showed the importance of individuals doing anything they could for a purpose.

Bibliography


Scope and Contents of Collection

The Sierra Blanca Proposed Nuclear Waste Site Collection, 1984-2001 documents the grassroots effort to put a halt to the Vermont-Maine Compact, legislation which proposed to use the Faskin Ranch in Sierra Blanca as a low level nuclear waste site. A unified effort to stop the proposal began in 1996 and culminated in 1998 with a judicial block preventing the compact from carrying out. Opponents of the waste site argued that the location was geologically unsafe and would leak, as all nuclear waste sites have, it disenfranchised the impoverished Hispanic residents of Sierra Blanca, and the transport route put lives at risk. Proponents of the waste site argued that the waste would be solid and thus not leak, was geologically safe, and good for the Texas economy. After two years of legal battles and outreach culminating with a trip to Vermont, the Vermont-Maine Compact was judicially blocked. The official reason was that it was geologically unsafe, though activists argue that the unofficial second reason was that it disenfranchised the Hispanic community at Sierra Blanca.

The Sierra Blanca Collection contains many newspaper articles related to the proposed nuclear waste site in Sierra Blanca, chronology and timelines, fact sheets and other information on Sierra Blanca. It also contains research materials related to nuclear waste in general, nuclear accidents such as Chernobyl, and other nuclear waste sites. The collection also contains legislative files regarding the Sierra Blanca hearings, correspondence, cartoons, and ephemera. Other environmental movements in the Big Bend are also documented such as Tourists Not Trucks and Blue Skies Over Big Bend.

Arrangement

Subjects and Indexing Terms
Radioactive Waste Disposal
Radioactive Waste Repositories
Environmental Justice
Environmentalism
Sierra Blanca (Tex.)
Hudspeth County (Tex.)

Series I: Publicity Records, 1984-2001

Physical Description: 2 boxes

Series Scope and Content Summary
This series contains the primary source information on the grassroots effort to put a stop to the proposed Sierra Blanca nuclear waste site. The organizers in the Big Bend, Austin, and Vermont aimed to provide exposure to their movement and inform as many people as possible about the detriments of creating a nuclear waste site at Sierra Blanca. Much of the material in this series is newspaper articles related to Sierra Blanca, arranged chronologically. Other records include fact sheets, information on Vermont Yankee, the nuclear plant seeking to transport the waste, and reports. Also included is information about other environmental causes in the Big Bend region including the movement Tourists Not Trucks, air quality in the Big Bend, and Air Force flyovers.

Arrangement
This series is arranged alphabetically.

Box 1

Folder 1  1998 Tax Info
Primarily articles, letters to reps
Folder 2  Activist Files- Addington, Bill, 1998
Folder 3  Activist Files- Boren, Richard, 1997
Folder 4  Activist Files- Curry, Susan, 1998-1999
Folder 5  Activist Files- Haynes, Stephanie, 1998
Folder 6  Activist Files- Oliver, Gary, 1996-1997
Folder 7  Activist Files- Dano, 1997
Folder 8  Activist Files- Molly, 1984-1998
Note: Includes 1984 articles on considering West Texas land as nuclear waste site
Folder 9  Activist Files- Val, 1993-1999
Folder 10 Air Force Flyovers, 1996-1998
Folder 11 Air Quality- Big Bend, 1997-1999
Folder 12 Air Quality- Blue Skies Initiative, 1998-1999
Folder 13  Air Quality- Carbon I & II, 1996-1997
Folder 14  Air Quality- Press Articles & Releases, 1999
Folder 15  Air Quality- Public Meeting, 1998 August 20
Folder 16  Air Quality- TDH Survey, 1999 January
Folder 17  Alpine Pilot Club, 2001
Folder 18  Bush Propaganda, 1998 April
Folder 19  Caucuses, 1997-1998 (1 of 2)
Folder 20  Caucuses, 1997-1998 (2 of 2)
Folder 21  City of Presidio Resolution, 1998 February 17
Folder 22  Compact, 1988-1997
Folder 23  Compact Transport Route- Maps & Letters, 1998
Folder 24  The Congress of Coahuila Declaration, 1995 January 26
Folder 25  Demographic Statistics, 1996
Folder 26  Faxes From SBLDF, ACES & NIRS, 1998 April-August
Folder 27  Letters Against S 270 & HR 629, 1997-1998
          See Correspondence for Additional Letters
Folder 28  Low-Level Radioactive Waste Management Issues, 2000
Folder 29  Low-Level Radioactive Waste Compact, 1997-1998
Folder 30  Nuclear Information and Resource Service (NIRS) Declaration, 1997 April 21
Folder 31  Nuclear Transportation, 1992-1998
Folder 32  Nuke Off, 1998 March
Folder 33  Petitions, 1998 & undated
Folder 34  The People vs. TNRCC, undated
Folder 35  Radiation Rangers Citation of Governor George Bush, 1997 August 16
Folder 36  Radioactive Material License, 1996-1997
Folder 39  Radioactive Waste Transportation- letters to Editors, 1998 August
Folder 40  Reports- Analysis of Public Opinion on Low-Level Radioactive Waste Disposal in Selected
          Texas Counties, 1984 April
Folder 41  Reports- An Environmental and Safety Analysis of a Proposed Low-Level Radioactive Waste
          Disposal Facility Near Sierra Blanca, Hudspeth County, Texas, 1996 March
Folder 42  Reports- Excess Capacity for the Disposal of Low-Level Radioactive Waste in the United
          States Makes the Compact System Unnecessary, 1996
Folder 43  Reports- Review of the License Application for the Proposed LLRW Facility Near Sierra
          Blanca, Texas, 1996 August 13
Folder 44  Resolutions, 1995-1996

**Box 2**

Folder 45  Sierra Blanca, 1996 April - September
Folder 46  Sierra Blanca Activism, 1984-1996
Folder 47  Sierra Blanca Articles, 1990-1995
Folder 48  Sierra Blanca Articles, 1996
Series II: Research Files, 1986-2000

Physical Description: 1 box

Series Scope and Content Summary

This series contains research materials on nuclear waste, other nuclear waste sites, nuclear waste transport, nuclear catastrophes such as Chernobyl, and environmental studies. The bulk of this series consists of reports on various environmental topics, primarily regarding nuclear waste.

Arrangement

This series is arranged alphabetically.
Box 3

Folder 82 Accidental Nuclear War, 1998 Apr.
Folder 83 Andrews County Texas—Private Nuke Dump, 1999
Folder 84 Articles—Nuclear Waste & Nuclear Accidents, 1993-1999
Folder 85 Children of Chernobyl, 1986
Folder 86 Deadly Nuclear Radiation Hazards (Map), 1995 Dec.
Folder 87 Endangered Species Act, 1997
Folder 88 Environmental Studies, 1993-1997
Folder 89 Flyovers, 1996-1997
Folder 90 Japanese Nuclear Accident, 1999
Folder 91 Newsletters, 1996-1998
Folder 93 Nuclear Waste Sites, 1997-1998
Folder 94 Radioactive Waste Information, 2000
Folder 95 Radioactive Waste Transport, 1998
Folder 97 Reports: Civilian Radioactive Waste Management Program Plan, 1998 July
Folder 98 Reports: Current TNRCC Radiation Rules, 1996 July
Folder 99 Reports: Locations of spent Nuclear Fuel and High Level Radioactive Waste Ultimately Destined for Geologic Disposal, 1944 September
Folder 100 Reports: OCRWM Transportation Report, 1995 June
Folder 101 Reports: Out of Sight: Haze in our National Parks, 2000 July
Folder 102 Reports: Proposed Expansion of German Air Force Operations at Holloman AFB, New Mexico, 1998 Apr
Folder 103 Reports: Procedural Rules for Cases Before the Texas Natural Resources Conservation Commission, 1996 June
Folder 104 Reports: Radioactive Substance Rules, 1997 June
Folder 105 Reports: Science Society, and America’s Nuclear Waste
Folder 106 Reports: Strategic Plan for Building New Nuclear Power Plants, 1993 November
Folder 107 Reports: Texas Administrative Code Chapter 336, 1996 August
Folder 108 Reports: Viability Assessment of a Repository at Yucca Mountain, 1998 December
Folder 110 Reports: Why are scientists Studying Yucca Mountain?, 1998 April
Folder 111 Reports: Yucca Mountain Site Nevada Research and Development Area, Nevada, 1986 May
Folder 112 Socio-economic Studies, 1996-1998
Folder 113 TNRCC Criticism, 1997
Folder 114 Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, 1998
Series III: Correspondence, 1996-2001

Physical Description: 1 box

Series Scope and Content Summary

This series primarily contains administrative emails sent and received by the Sierra Blanca organizers related to their outreach and research efforts as well as letters to congressional representatives and legislators related to the proposed nuclear waste site.

Arrangement

This series is arranged alphabetically.

Box 4

Folder 115  Emails, 1996
Folder 116  Emails, 1997 January - June
Folder 117  Emails, 1997 July - September
Folder 118  Emails, 1997 October - December
Folder 119  Emails, 1998 January - March
Folder 120  Emails, 1998 April - July
Folder 121  Emails, 1998 August - December
Folder 122  Emails, 1999 January - March
Folder 123  Emails, 1999 April - December
Folder 124  Emails, 2000
Folder 125  Gallego, Pete P., 1997-2001
Folder 126  Letters to Representatives, 1992
Folder 127  Letters to Representatives, 1993
Folder 128  Letters to Representatives, 1994
Folder 129  Letters to Representatives, 1995
Folder 130  Letters to Representatives, 1996
Folder 131  Letters to Representatives, 1997
Folder 132  Solar, Susan Lee, 1997
Folder 133  Vermont Compact Support, 1998

Series IV: Meetings & Hearings, 1988-1999

Physical Description: 1 box

Series Scope and Content Summary

This series contains the legislative papers regarding the hearings in Washington on Sierra Blanca. Testimonies, discovery documents, and reports are included in these hearings. This series also contains documentation on other types of meetings and events such as those sponsored by the Sierra Club. Full legislative text of the Vermont Compact agreement in its various forms are also included.
**Arrangement**

This series is arranged alphabetically.

**Box 5**

Folder 134 75th Texas Legislature-Committee on Environmental Regulation, 1997 March 25
Folder 135 Discovery Questions, 1997 April 27
Folder 137 H.B. 1171-Buster Brown, 1999
Folder 138 H.B. 2665, 1991 August
Folder 139 H.R. 558 Hearing, 1995 December 20
Folder 140 H.R. 629, 1997 February 6
Folder 141 Meeting Agenda & Notes, 1996 November 18
Folder 142 Meeting Notes, undated
Folder 143 Senate Finance Committee Hearing, 1997 January 20
Folder 144 Sierra Blanca Hearings, 1996 August, 1998 October
Folder 145 Sierra Blanca Hearings, 1997 March 25-26
Folder 146 Sierra Club, 1991-1997
Folder 147 Sierra Club-Denver Workshop, 1999 March 13
Folder 148 Testimonies-Bowmer, William J., 1997 March 3
Folder 149 Testimonies-Parsons, Edmund M., 1988 June 23
Folder 150 Testimonies-Resnikoff, Marvin, 1997 October 3
Folder 151 Testimonies-Tate, Arthur C., 1997 October 3
Folder 152 Texas Compact Congressional Status Report, 1997 February 24
Folder 153 Texas Legislature 76th Session, 1999
Folder 154 Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission, 1996 October (1 of 2)
Folder 155 Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission, 1996 October (2 of 2)
Folder 156 Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission, 1996 November-December
Folder 157 Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission, 1997 January
Folder 158 Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission, 1997 May
Folder 159 Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission, 1997 September
Folder 160 TNRCC & SOAH Orders, 1997
Folder 161 TNRCC/TLLRWDA, 1998 January 20
Folder 162 Texas Senate Agenda, 1997 March 25
Folder 163 Texas Senate Agenda, 1999 March 8

**Series V: Ephemera, 1988-1999**

**Physical Description:** 1 box

**Series Scope and Content Summary**

This series contains ephemera related to the Sierra Blanca Movement. Artist Gary Oliver published many cartoons in the Big Bend Sentinel which focused on environmentalism and the Proposed Sierra Blanca nuclear waste site. Some of these cartoons are included in this series. Of interest is Gary Oliver’s
zine/booklet *Gary Oliver’s West Texas* which includes many of his cartoons and a detailed explanation of nuclear waste and the Sierra Blanca site. Other materials include brochures, flyers, and photographs.

**Arrangement**

This series is arranged alphabetically.

**Box 5**

Folder 165  Cartoons- Gary Oliver, 1996-1998  
Folder 166  Cartoons- Tom Curry, 1997  
Folder 167  Gary Oliver’s West Texas, 1998  
Note: Zine featuring Gary Oliver’s cartoons and information about Sierra Blanca  
Folder 168  Flyers, 1996  
Folder 169  Mailing List and Calendar, 1997  
Folder 170  Miscellaneous, 1997 and undated  
Note: Includes images of Susan Curry inspecting nuclear waste containers, handouts, cards