

Case 3

In 1997 the Skull Valley Band of the Goshutes, a small Native American nation, agreed to store 40,000 metric tons of high-level uranium on its reservation (60 miles southwest of Salt Lake City) until a permanent site is opened elsewhere. Utah State officials and environmentalists adamantly oppose the project. Governor Michael Leavitt reasons that since Utah has no nuclear reactors, it should not be responsible for other States' nuclear waste. He also fears that the temporary site could become a permanent one given the difficulty and expense involved in transporting nuclear waste to the site.

Leon Bear, a Goshute leader, however, condemns the opposition to the temporary storage plan of "blatant racism." He says, "Before Utah was even a State my people signed a treaty with the federal government. We were granted a small reservation in Skull Valley. During the past fifty years, the Utah and U.S. governments have built many hazardous-waste facilities and disposal sites near our reservation, even burying sheep killed by nerve gas on our tribal lands. Did either government ask for our permission? Of course not."

For Leon Bear, opposing the temporary storage project is tantamount to denying the Goshutes the right to pursue financial prosperity. Few economic opportunities exist on the reservation, and the project will provide desperately needed income. The estimated cost of the project exceeds \$3 billion, and, although the Goshute's remuneration is confidential, sources predict that each tribal member should receive \$100,000 at a minimum, and, possibly, as much as \$2,000,000.

The agreement marks a significant shift in tribal leaders attitudes toward the environment and nuclear waste. In 1992 leaders wrote: "European Americans must re-examine their lifestyles and ask how we can co-exist with the environment. They must understand, as Chief Seattle warned over a century ago, that man is only a strand in the web of life."

Support for the project within the tribe is not unanimous, however. Margene Bullcreek, who lives three miles from the proposed site, believes that the repository is inconsistent with traditional Indian respect for the land. "It's about being in harmony with our creator, and showing Him we do not wish to spoil His gift to us," she says.

Despite the widespread opposition to the Skull Valley repository, plans continue to move ahead. In May 2000, Governor Leavitt conceded that the State of Utah may not have legal authority to stop the project in virtue of the 1863 treaty between the Goshutes and the federal government which gave the tribe sovereignty over its traditional land, which includes Skull Valley.