13. Outcomes

Print

To date, neither Pennsylvania nor New York has built an LLRW disposal facility. Both states gave up on their unpopular sitting programs shortly after Republicans replaced Democrats in the 1994 gubernatorial elections.

The New York process was derailed when angry residents challenged proposed sites on account of inaccuracies discovered in the state's GIS data, and because of the state's failure to make the data accessible for citizen review in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act (Monmonier, 1995).

Pennsylvania's $37 million siting effort succeeded in disqualifying more than three-quarters of the state's land area but failed to recommend any qualified 500-acre sites. With the volume of its LLRW decreasing, and the Barnwell South Carolina facility still willing to accept Pennsylvania's waste shipments, the search was suspended "indefinitely" in 1998.

To fulfill its obligations under the LLRW Policy Act, Pennsylvania has initiated a "Community Partnering Plan" that solicits volunteer communities to host a LLRW disposal facility in return for jobs, construction revenues, shares of revenues generated by user fees, property taxes, scholarships, and other benefits. The plan has this to say about the GIS site selection process that preceded it: "The previous approach had been to impose the state's will on a municipality by using a screening process based primarily on technical criteria. In contrast, the Community Partnering Plan is voluntary." (Chem Nuclear Systems, 1996, p. 3)

The New York and Pennsylvania state governments turned to GIS because it offered an impartial and scientific means to locate a facility that nobody wanted in their backyard. Concerned residents criticized the GIS approach as impersonal and technocratic. There is truth to both points of view. Specialists in geographic information need to understand that while GIS can be effective in answering certain well-defined questions, it does not ease the problem of resolving conflicts between private and public interests.

Meanwhile, a Democrat replaced a Republican as governor of South Carolina in 1998. The new governor warned that the Barnwell facility might not continue to accept out-of-state LLRW. "We don't want to be labeled as the dumping ground for the entire country," his spokesperson said (Associated Press, 1998).

No volunteer municipality has yet come forward in response to Pennsylvania's Community Partnering Plan. If the South Carolina facility does stop accepting Pennsylvania's LLRW shipments, and if no LLRW disposal facility is built within the state's borders, then nuclear power plants, hospitals, laboratories, and other facilities may be forced to store LLRW on site. It will be interesting to see if the GIS approach to site selection is resumed as a last resort, or if the state will continue to up the ante in its attempts to attract volunteers, in the hope that every municipality has its price. If and when a volunteer community does come forward, detailed geographic data will be produced, integrated, and analyzed to make sure that the proposed site is suitable, after all.

Try This!

The Nature of Geographic Information

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To find out about LLRW-related activities where you live, use your favorite search engine to search the Web on "Low-Level Radioactive Waste [your state or area of interest]". If GIS is involved in your state's LLRW disposal facility site selection process, your state agency that is concerned with environmental affairs is likely to be involved.

This textbook is used as a resource in Penn State's Online Geospatial Education online degree and certificate programs. If this topic is interesting to you and you want to learn more about online GIS and GEOINT education at Penn State, check out our Geospatial Education Program Office.

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