

Encyclopedia of Politics of the American West

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The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and its predecessor agencies, particularly the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), have had and continue to have a major economic, environmental, and political impact on the western United States. Reasons for this include federal ownership of significant quantities of land in this part of the country; the presence of significant natural resources, including natural gas, oil, and water; the presence of high-quality universities and corporations with relevant scientific expertise to effectively develop and exploit these resources to promote economic growth; and the skillful use of congressional earmarking by western politicians such as Sen. Henry Jackson, D-Wash. (1912–83), Sen. Jeff Bingaman, D-N. Mex., and Rep. Don Young, R-Ark., to place these facilities in their states and districts to enhance economic development, provide high-paying jobs for a skilled workforce, and ensure their long-term electoral prospects.

Examples of historic and current DOE facilities include the Hanford plant in Washington; Rocky Flats plant and the National Renewable Energy Laboratory in Colorado; Idaho National Laboratory in Idaho Falls, Idaho; Yucca Mountain in Nevada; Bonneville Power Administration in Oregon; Lawrence Berkeley and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories in California; and Los Alamos and Sandia National Laboratories in New Mexico. These facilities have produced and continue producing major scientific research and development advances in energy production and conservation, chemistry, hydrology, nanotechnology, nuclear physics, physics, power generation, and solar energy. These facilities, particularly the DOE national laboratories, have been responsible for developing and maintaining the U.S. nuclear weapons program through research, simulation, and testing. Their national security responsibilities also involve various areas of homeland security such as cybersecurity, detecting and deterring weapons of mass production proliferation, deterring terrorism, remediating the effects of terrorist incidents, and helping other countries peacefully develop nuclear and other energy sources.

These efforts also have produced significant environmental costs and legal litigation. The Hanford and Rocky Flats nuclear facilities produced significant environmental pollution and damage to workers' health through unsafe working and disposal conditions. Controversy continues to exist over how to properly dispose of nuclear

waste generated by these laboratories. Nevada's Yucca Mountain site was proposed as the final repository for the United States' nuclear waste, but determined opposition from Nevada politicians and residents resulted in a lack of funding by the Obama Administration in 2010 and 2011. As of 2012, no alternative site for such a repository has been proposed.

Transporting hazardous waste also remains a contentious political issue facing the DOE when applied to the western United States. Efforts to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil and natural gas have increased the controversy over whether the United States should develop and exploit untapped oil and natural gas resources in the Rocky Mountains, Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and North Dakota and Montana's Bakken Reserve or transport extensive oil shale resources by pipeline from Alberta, Canada, into the United States. Numerous conflicting regional economic, environmental, and political issues involving DOE will determine how such controversy will be debated and resolved.

The DOE will also continue conducting research on how to mitigate climate change and the potential environmental impacts of such change on the western United States. Its ability to conduct such missions will also be impacted by the United States' acute financial crisis, which will likely result in a reduction in this agency's appropriations and its presence in many western states. The unpopularity of such reduced presence will be expressed across the political spectrum. DOE remains a critical part of the western economic, environmental, and political landscape and its importance will not change appreciably. It will also continue energy policy interaction with agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation, and Enforcement (BOEMRE), the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS).

Despite potential reductions in its physical presence as the United States attempts to reduce its national debt, DOE's footprint will remain because of the enormous political influence of western Representatives and Senators [p. 310 ↓] on congressional energy and appropriations committees, legislative lobbying entities such as the Congressional Western Caucus, and western-based commercial interests and nonprofit activist organizations covering energy industries, including electricity, geothermal, natural gas, oil, water, and wind along with environmental implications of energy policy.

Atomic Power in the West

On December 20, 1951, Experimental Breeder Reactor I in Arco, Idaho, produced the world's first electric power generated from nuclear energy and marked the dawn of atomic power in the West. The benefits of nuclear energy include lower-cost production that does not emit pollutants that contribute to acid rain, ground level ozone, or smog. Although atomic power offers a clean energy alternative to fossil fuels, it also comes with inherent obstacles, such as the risk of catastrophic accidents, high construction costs, and waste storage. "Not in my backyard" embodies the views of many residents of the western states, where residents have continually rallied against the construction of nuclear power plants and high-level nuclear waste repositories.

San Onofre Nuclear Power Generating Station (near San Diego, California) was shut down in early 2012 to repair radiation leaks in newly installed steam generators. Anti-nuclear activists continue to build public support for decommissioning nuclear power plants in California.



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In the past, citizens in the western states have often been apprehensive accepting governmental rhetoric. Because of their populist and progressive heritage, western citizens have routinely demanded a voice in the location and use of atomic energy in their respective states. Twenty-two western states, including Alaska and Hawai'i, reside in the Nuclear Regulatory Commission Region IV, which contains twenty-one nuclear power reactors located over fourteen separate sites. When compared to the rest of the United States with its fifty-one sites and over eighty reactors it is clear "Not in my backyard" has achieved some measure of success preventing construction of new plants.

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See also

Further Readings

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