

Linda Intro: Sustainable Idaho is brought to you by the Portneuf Resource Council.

Madison Long Introduction: Welcome to Sustainable Idaho. I'm your host, Madison Long, and this is the second episode in a two-part series discussing recent changes in spent nuclear waste transport coming to Idaho. As a reminder, in late April 2025, Idaho and the Trump Administration agreed to a targeted waiver of the 1995 Idaho Settlement Agreement. With the targeted waiver, INL plans to receive a high burnup nuclear fuel cask from the North Anna Nuclear Power Generating Station in Virginia tentatively around 2027. Last week I talked to Chrisitan Natoni to discuss the research initiatives behind the shipment and today, I talked with Leigh Ford, the executive director of the Snake River Alliance, to talk about the potential dangers of spent nuclear waste transport.

To start, could you tell our listeners a little bit about the history and context of the Snake River Alliance and what they do for Idaho?

Leigh Ford: So, the Snake River Alliance was founded in 1979, shortly after the Three Mile Island meltdown, when a group of Idahoans came together, and we were concerned about the Department of Energy and Idaho National Lab injecting radioactive waste into Idaho's sole source aquifer, our Snake River Aquifer. The founders wanted to learn more about what Idaho National Lab was doing, what DOE was doing, and educate people in our communities about the risks to our water and our health. Later, we incorporated a clean energy program to focus on renewable energy and promoting that. Over the years, we've served as Idaho's nuclear watchdog, educating our communities, and opposing things that we think put us at risk.

ML: Located near Idaho Falls, Idaho National Lab, or INL, operates to advance nuclear energy concepts, protect the power grid, and collaborate with numerous industries to turn waste into fuel. INL plays a crucial role in supporting the U.S. Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program, by conducting research and development on nuclear reactor technologies, materials, and fuel. Additionally, INL provides testing and examination facilities for naval nuclear components and spent fuel.

What is Snake River Alliance's view on the legacy of nuclear waste disposal at INL and its impact on the Snake River Aquifer?

LF: In 1952, the Idaho National Lab became basically the waste site for the nuclear weapons complex. We still receive all the spent nuclear waste from the nuclear Navy. Before the 70s, waste was just dumped into unlined pits. Over half the containers were breached, and waste was leaked. Then later on, they would basically stack it up and then bury it with dirt. They were also injecting it directly into our aquifer, and the last injection well was capped in 1989. So there's a long history of nuclear waste at Idaho National Lab, both that's been brought here and stuff we've created.

ML: In 2018, the SRA created a "Don't Waste Idaho" campaign in order to stop the Department of Energy's plan to transport plutonium waste to Idaho from Hanford, Washington. The Alliance's

concern was that the shipment would be tested and treated in Idaho as scheduled, but rather than be shipped to New Mexico for permanent disposal, it would remain stranded in Idaho. What type of strategies did the campaign use to stop the shipments?

LF: Hanford's on the Columbia River in Washington, and it's probably one of the most contaminated sites on earth. We employed some creative attention-getting strategy. We had painted radioactive waste barrels and went on a radioactive roadshow across southern Idaho, just to educate people about what the plans were and to get public support against it. We talked to mayors across southern Idaho, we drove letter campaigns, email campaigns, and we delivered a petition to then Attorney General Wasden with thousands of signatures. Eventually, I think that public pressure got the Attorney General to stop that waste from coming.

ML: The shipment currently planned from the North Anna Nuclear Power Generating Station will be a high burnup nuclear waste fuel cask. To break down this term, a "burnup" is a way to measure how much uranium, which powers the nuclear reactors, is burned. Essentially, how much energy is generated by the uranium. To be considered high-burnup nuclear waste, the fuel stays in the reactor for longer periods of time. The fuel cask for this waste is a tested and modified container to hold for long-term storage. INL plans to use research on the shipment to evaluate how the fuel would perform during long-term dry storage, which is needed by over 53 nuclear sites nationwide to renew their licenses and continue storing nuclear fuel.

LF: It's interesting. Attorney General Wasden blocked this North Anna waste from coming to Idaho in 2015, because the Department of Energy had not met their deadlines in cleanup at Idaho National Lab. Now that the waiver has been okayed under the new Attorney General, I have concerns that more research quantities will be coming because of the nuclear renaissance that's really trying to take off.

ML: The nuclear renaissance mentioned by Ford refers to the renewed interest and revival of nuclear energy as a viable solution for meeting global energy needs and addressing climate change. Although some scientists are expressing their concerns about the cost of time, money, and resources on, to quote the Union of Concerned Scientists, "high-risk energy concepts."

At the INL, there have been no recorded nuclear waste accidents during transport to their facilities. The United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission, NRC, has engineered transportation casks to withstand severe accidents, impacts, fires, and submersion, with the ultimate goal of reducing accidents as a whole. However, there are still cases of accidents like in March 2021 when a truck carrying uranium hexafluoride containers lost two of them while on a North Carolina highway.

In the off-chance an accident might occur, does the Snake River Alliance intend to challenge the waiver legally or push for a broader reform of the settlement agreement to ensure the safety of Idaho?

LF: From what I've heard, the opportunity for waivers such as we're seeing today has always been a concern, even from the start of when it was drafted. We sort of expected something like this to happen. We haven't looked into legal action, but we're certainly not opposed to it. But, we really need to have a Governor and Attorney General with the courage to stand up to the Department of Energy and do what's right for the citizens of Idaho. To make sure that Idaho doesn't become a nuclear waste dump.

I think if there's enough public outrage, the politicians will listen and it will give them the courage to speak out. We haven't planned any campaign yet, but I can see another radioactive roadshow in the works. I know next year we were already planning a celebration of the aquifer, which we can definitely use as a tool for learning and awareness, but educating the public's going to be key and it's going to be up to the public to fight back.

ML: What is your suggestion for Idahoans who want to get involved?

LF: Idahoans can stop this, talk to your families, friends, neighbors about your concern. A lot of people in western Idaho don't even know about Idaho National Lab. So it's good to just even talk about it and your concerns with the waste. Always email, call the Governor and Attorney General and let them know your concerns. Attend town halls and ask questions, especially if Department of Energy is holding any kind of meeting, attend that and ask them questions about what they're doing to keep us safe.

ML: Is there anything that you'd like to add for us to know about nuclear waste shipments and why they're a danger to Idaho?

LF: I think nuclear waste shipments are a danger to everybody. We're continuing to make it and we're posed to make more. We're going to have to deal with it for tens of thousands of years, unfortunately, and it's our position that it's irresponsible to continue creating it when the next generation has to deal with it. The whole fuel chain is dangerous from the mining and milling to the transportation. Hopefully people learn or start to realize that it's just not the safest, cleanest, least expensive way to create energy.

ML: SRA suggests nuclear waste be contained within hardened casks for on-site power plant storage. This reduces transportation risks and avoids placing the burden of radioactive waste onto singled-out "waste communities." As for nuclear energy production, SRA says that "almost anything is better than nuclear because radioactive waste remains dangerous for at least 10,000 years. Nuclear costs too much and our tax dollars should be helping American families, not the nuclear industry."

ML Outro: Thank you to Leigh Ford from the Snake River Alliance for discussing the history of spent nuclear waste transport and the potential for another shipment. If you want to learn more or to get involved with the Snake River Alliance, Ford suggests exploring the SRA website at snakeriveralliance.org.

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