



Department of Energy

Washington, DC 20585

September 20, 1999

SEP 23 1999

Dr. Jared L. Cohon
Chairman
Nuclear Waste Technical Review Board
2300 Clarendon Boulevard
Arlington, Virginia 22201-3367

Dear Dr. Cohon:

This letter transmits the Department of Energy's response to the Nuclear Waste Technical Review Board's *A Report to the U.S. Congress and the Secretary of Energy, Moving Beyond the Yucca Mountain Viability Assessment*, issued in April 1999. Our detailed responses to the Board's report are found in the enclosure.

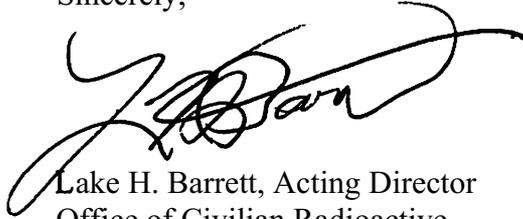
I thank you for commending the Department on our successful and timely completion of the viability assessment (VA). The Department agrees that the VA was a useful management tool for integrating our work and setting priorities. We also agree that the VA is not the same as a suitability evaluation; in fact, the VA identified the additional work to evaluate suitability and prepare a license application. We are pleased that the Board has found that the testing and research plans described in the VA are generally consistent with those identified by the Board.

The Board's report supports continuing focused studies at Yucca Mountain and emphasizes the importance of reducing uncertainties in repository performance. The Department is currently reevaluating our science and engineering activities, taking into account potential budget reductions and advances in the reference repository and waste package designs. We share the Board's concern that budget reductions could cause deferral of planned studies. We are prioritizing the activities most important for supporting the site recommendation decision. We will be emphasizing those activities that reduce the level of uncertainty in the performance of the repository/.

In this report the Board noted the merits of a lower thermal loading in reducing uncertainties in repository performance. In response to these and previous recommendations of the Board, we have undertaken an evaluation of alternative designs, as was described at the Board's January and June meetings of this year, for the next phase in the continuing evolution of design concepts. We are considering the recommendation of our Management and Operating (M&O) contractor for a design with a lower thermal loading than the VA reference design, in part for its merits in reducing uncertainties in performance.

The input provided by the Board contributed to the quality of the viability assessment. We value the Board's feedback as we continue with the additional work to support a decision for the Nation on geologic disposal at Yucca Mountain. If you have any questions, please contact me at (202) 586-6850.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lake H. Barrett", written in a cursive style.

Lake H. Barrett, Acting Director
Office of Civilian Radioactive
Waste Management

Enclosure