Handling of nuclear waste: Bureaucrats bumble again

Storage of nuclear waste has become the No. 1 public relations problem for Diablo Canyon and the other nuclear power plants around the country.

Pacific Gas and Electric Co. is trying to increase the capacity of its storage facility and opponents contend the storage is unsafe.

The way it looks now, that battle may go on until sometime after the turn of the century because the federal government has been unable to speed up a program for permanent burial of nuclear waste.

The federal Department of Energy announced a few days ago that it cannot meet the deadline of establishing the country's first high-level nuclear fuel waste dump by the 1998 deadline. It now says the job will take another five years.

Test drillings at a proposed site at Yucca Mountain in Nevada under the revised program will not be made until sometime during the second quarter of 1988. Tests at the Hanford nuclear reservation in Washington and at the Deaf Smith County site in Texas will come later. All three are candidates to become the first permanent dump site.

Meanwhile, the Energy Department will submit a plan to Congress for a temporary above-ground depot where waste can be stored until the permanent burial site or sites are opened.

All this reflects what must be considered one of the federal government's most inept chapters. Surely, the management of nuclear power and the waste it produces deserves a higher level of governmental organizational skills than it has been given.

There is little question that the provision of permanent dumps for nuclear waste should have been worked out before the construction of nuclear power plants was allowed to proliferate. The idea that every nuclear power plant should be prepared to store its own waste for 20 or 30 years — nearly as long as the life of such a power plant — is just not satisfactory.

It is not fair to the power plant operators and it is not fair to those of us who have to live near power plants.

Those who speak unkindly of the federal bureaucracy have good reason to do so in the case of management of nuclear power. The various phases of nuclear power plant operation are split up among four agencies — Energy, Environmental Protection, Transportation and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. Often one agency doesn't know what the others are doing.

In addition responsibilities are divided between the federal government and the states.

We have said before that one agency in Washington should be given all the responsibility of managing all facets of this monster.

If there can be a National Aeronautics and Space Agency, there can just as well be a National Nuclear Power Agency.

Otherwise, we will see more delays and, two decades from now, we will wake up and be even more dismayed that management and control of nuclear power has been such a failure — particularly in storage of its waste.