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Don't prejudge site's future

Clint Wolfe

Letter to the Editor of *The Aiken Standard*

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An old tempest in a teapot is about to start simmering again at the Barnwell low-level radioactive waste site. The contractor at the site wants to change the mix and some of the criteria for accepting waste for disposal there.

The rationale for the changes is that the site can better serve the nation, create many jobs in the local community, and return tens of millions of dollars to the state of South Carolina in the form of taxes and fees.

Additionally, the proposed changes would not increase the amount of radioactive material allowed in the disposal site, so at first blush, this seems like a no-brainer. But the immediate reaction from several quarters is to reject the idea even before we know what is being proposed.

The process normally followed in nuclear matters is to evaluate the potential health and environmental impacts of a proposed course of action and then make an informed decision.

It seems that even though a specific proposal has not been spelled out in proposed legislation, enough is known in the minds of many to relegate the idea to the dead-on-arrival file.

Being an advocate for nuclear energy, I am used to people adopting a mindset that is consistent with their beliefs, if not the facts.

One of my favorite lines is by Charles McKay, author of "Extraordinary Popular Delusion and the Madness of Crowds." It says, "Men go mad in herds. They recover their senses only slowly, and one by one."

A less eloquent way to say the same thing is that it is easier to "pile on" than to do your own thinking.

It would seem that we currently are experiencing an extreme case of piling on in spite of the fact that no public health concern has ever been demonstrated at the Barnwell site. The South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control, or DHEC, has been a very attentive regulator of the site and the long, relatively spotless operating history of the site is well documented on the DHEC website. Perhaps because DHEC could never find serious fault with the site, they, themselves, became the target of those critical of the site.

The rhetoric aimed at Barnwell and DHEC is replete with predictable adjectives designed to create fear in the minds of the public.

Words such as lethal, deadly, and dangerous abound amid discussions of the Barnwell facility by opponents. But, their warnings are based on a flawed understanding of the science involved.

As yet, we don't have a complete picture of what is being proposed, but when we do, let's hope we can make whatever decision is appropriate based on sound science and not on fear mongering.

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