Legislative limelights . . .

Leaders view nuclear issue in calm light

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By BEN J. PLASTINO
Post-Register political editor

The present controversy swirling about alleged serious contamination of the Snake River aquifer, the huge underground flow of water which gushes into the Snake River, indicates this topic may become one of the leading ones in the 1980 Idaho Legislature.

Idaho's political leaders, such as Gov. John V. Evans, House Speaker Ralph Olmstead, R-Twin Falls; and Senate President Pro Tem Reed Budge, R-Soda Springs, are among those who take a tempered and realistic views in the development of nuclear power.

The two chairmen of legislative committees which likely would handle such types of legislation, Sen. J. Marsden Williams, R-Idaho Falls, and Rep. Vard Chatburn, R-Albion, also are sympathetic to nuclear development.

The conservative structure of the Legislature, with noted exceptions, and most state election officials, are nuclear oriented in view of the tremendous research and development activities going on at the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory and what they feel is the defendable merit and safety of nuclear power.

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The Lewiston Morning Tribune, in a copyright story 10 days ago, suddenly announced there was contamination in the aquifer. This is a story this writer handled in detail as early as Sept. 19, 1976, more than three years ago — and since then has followed with a number of stories.
stories.

The Tribune story, unfortunately, was badly distorted to indicate the contamination was serious. Evans at first was alarmed, but placed the situation in perspective when told of the facts.

Jack Barraclough, director of U.S. Geological Survey at INEL, has constantly released these studies as available, they never were a secret as the Tribune inferred. They have never been of more than passing interest in this nuclear-oriented community but apparently bring alarm to those in other sections of the state who are less informed, such as at Lewiston.

Certainly Evans and Gov. Cecil D. Andrus before him, are justified in asking that these low level radioactive wastes be removed eventually.

In fact — and this writer handled a story in detail several years ago — there is an area in the northeastern section of the INEL, which is not above the aquifer, where storage of such potentially dangerous waste could be made rather than in the present location in the southwestern section directly above the aquifer.

At that time, INEL officials said it was not economically feasible but in view of changed attitude, this is an alternative until a permanent nuclear waste repository can be established. The problems of double movement of the wastes needs assessment, however.

The salt beds near Carlsbad, N.M., have been the leading candidate for permanent storage but Gov. Bruce King is objecting to proposed storage of high level radioactive wastes, not the low-level variety.

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Rep. James Golder, R-Boise, who has announced plans for drafting legislation to stop shipment of radioactive wastes into Idaho, and some Boise area legislators and northern Idaho Democrats appear the leading opponents to nuclear development.

The only legislator employed at the INEL, Rep. Wendell Miller, D-Idaho Falls, announced plans for counter-legislation to seek a memorandum to Congress affirming Idaho's willingness to accept radioactive storage on a temporary basis.

The governor also does not oppose radioactive shipments, contending every state should do its share in such a task as part of the national defense and to help in nuclear research development.

David Leroy, state attorney general, at the request of Golder, is helping to draft legislation along this line.

Leroy said his role is confined to doing legal research on the authority or lack of authority to create statutes under the police power of the state and to restrict or regulate in this area. He added "once these facts are developed and the research done, the office will be able to answer Golder's questions and give such advice as we are called upon to deliver before the legislature on this issue."

Leroy advised Miller that his office "will leave the politics and merits of the matter (nuclear bills) to you and your fellow legislators."

Perhaps less informed Idaho legislators and others in other sections of the state should realize that the main thrust of INEL is to make the use of nuclear power as safe as possible.

The 9,200 employed at INEL and related facilities has a work force second only to the 11,000 of state government workers. They contribute significantly to the economy of the state.