AARON KUNZ, REPORTER: IN EARLY 2015, FORMER GOVERNORS CECIL ANDRUS AND PHIL BATT SPOKE OUT AGAINST A NEW PROPOSAL TO BRING SPENT COMMERCIAL NUCLEAR FUEL TO IDAHO. THE REASONING, THE 1995 SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT, WHICH BANS THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT FROM BRINGING IN ANY KIND OF COMMERCIAL FUEL. THAT SETTLEMENT AGREEMENT IS ONE-OF-A-KIND, AND WAS ORCHESTRATED UNDER THEN GOVERNOR PHIL BATT.

FORMER GOV. PHIL BATT: YOU KNOW - IT WAS THE MOST IMPORTANT PART OF MY ADMINISTRATION FOR AT LEAST HALF MY TERM SO...

FORMER GOV. CECIL ANDRUS: IT WAS, THAT’S PHIL’S LEGACY AND NOW THIS GROUP FOR THEIR LEGACY WANT TO DESTROY HIS. IT’S JUST DOESN’T MAKE ANY SENSE.

BATT: I DON’T THINK IT IS AT ALL NECESSARY.

KUNZ: GOVERNOR OTTER AND ATTORNEY GENERAL LAWRENCE WASDEN HAVE SAID THEY WILL ISSUE A WAIVER IF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY WERE TO SHOW SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS IN FIXING A HANDFUL OF MISSED DEADLINES. THE D.O.E. COULD THEN SHIP 50 SPENT NUCLEAR FUEL RODS FROM COMMERCIAL PLANTS TO IDAHO FOR RESEARCH PURPOSES.

ATTORNEY GENERAL LAWRENCE WASDEN: AND SO I SAID, “CAN YOU SHOW ME HOW YOU ARE GOING TO DO THIS? CAN YOU COME INTO COMPLIANCE IN THAT TIME WINDOW?” IF SO, GREAT; YOU CAN BRING THE STUFF IN. IF YOU CAN’T, YOU WON’T.

KUNZ: THE FUEL THAT WE ARE TALKING ABOUT ARE THIN, 12-FOOT TALL FUEL RODS THAT WOULD END UP HERE, AT THE MATERIALS AND FUELS COMPLEX. THAT’S WHERE WE MET WITH TODD ALLEN, THE DEPUTY DIRECTOR FOR SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY AT THE LAB.

TODD ALLEN, INL DEPUTY DIRECTOR: SO TO GIVE YOU AN IDEA OF WHAT WE MEAN BY A FUEL ROD. THIS IS A...IT’S A MOCKUP, BUT IT’S HALF OF A FUEL ROD. SO, THE DIAMETER IS CORRECT, BUT IT WOULD BE TWICE AS TALL. SO, THERE WOULD BE FIFTY OF THESE. IN A TYPICAL REACTOR THE FUEL IS BUNDLED IN ASSEMBLIES LIKE THIS, AND EACH ASSEMBLY HAS TWO HUNDRED AND SIXTY FOUR OF THESE. SO, WHAT’S BEING PROPOSED TO BE SHIPPED HERE IS A FRACTION OF ONE ASSEMBLY. NOW WITHIN THE REACTOR YOU HAVE HUNDREDS OF ASSEMBLIES AND OF COURSE WITHIN THE NATION YOU HAVE ABOUT A HUNDRED REACTORS. FROM A RESEARCH STANDPOINT, THESE ARE HIGH VALUE. I DON’T EVEN LIKE TO CALL THEM SPENT FUEL. I LIKE TO CALL THEM LIGHT WATER REACTOR FUEL. BECAUSE TO ME, IT’S HIGH VALUE BECAUSE WE CAN ONLY ANSWER SPECIFIC TECHNICAL QUESTIONS THAT THIS COUNTRY NEEDS TO ANSWER, BUT THERE IS NOT A LOT OF IT.

KUNZ: ALLEN SAYS THERE ARE UNIQUE DIFFERENCES IN FUEL RODS AT EVERY NUCLEAR REACTOR. THAT’S BECAUSE EVERY NUCLEAR REACTION IS DIFFERENT. IT’S IMPORTANT TO KNOW WHAT THOSE DIFFERENCES ARE BEFORE THE RODS CAN BE SAFELY USED AND EVENTUALLY STORED. THE RODS THAT END UP HERE AT THE MATERIALS AND FUELS COMPLEX IN THE ARCO DESERT ARE CUT INTO SMALL PELLETS AND SUBJECTED TO NUMEROUS EXPERIMENTS. SCIENTISTS THEN EXAMINE THE PELLETS THROUGH MICROSCOPES, LOOKING FOR WEAKNESS IN THE METAL RODS. ALLEN SAYS IT’S BETTER TO EXPERIENCE PROBLEMS HERE, IN A CONTROLLED ENVIRONMENT, THAN LATER AT AN ACTIVE POWER PLANT. THE D.O.E. IS ALLOWED, UNDER THE SETTLEMENT

AGREEMENT, TO SHIP FUEL FROM GOVERNMENT-OWNED REACTORS LIKE THOSE ON NUCLEAR SUBMARINES. THE INL, ACCORDING TO ALLEN, IS THE PREFERRED LAB BECAUSE IT HAS THE CAPABILITY TO DO ALL THE RESEARCH IN ONE LOCATION.

ALLEN: WE CAN SAFELY HANDLE SPENT FUEL. WHAT UTILITIES ARE DOING INCLUDING SOME THAT HAVE BEEN DECOMMISSIONED IS, THEY MOVE THEM TO THESE STORAGE CASKS THAT SIT AT THE SITE AND THEY ARE SAFE. THE NUCLEAR REGULATOR COMMISSION HAS SAID THEY ARE FINE, BUT THEY ARE NOT PREFERRED.

KUNZ: OPPONENTS LIKE FORMER GOVERNOR BATT POINT OUT THAT, AS OF NOW, THERE ISN’T A DESIGNATED REPOSITORY AFTER SHUTTING DOWN CONSTRUCTION OF YUCCA MOUNTAIN IN NEVADA. HE SAYS WITHOUT A FUTURE PLAN, FUEL THAT COMES TO IDAHO MAY BE HERE FOREVER.

BATT: AND I’M IN SYMPATHY WITH THEM ON THE NEED TO KEEP GENERATING JOBS.

I JUST DON’T THINK THAT’S THE WAY TO DO IT. TO SAY WE ARE GOING TO TAKE MORE WASTE BECAUSE YUCCA MOUNTAIN HAS BEEN CLOSED DOWN BY THE PRESIDENT AND OTHER PEOPLE AND THERES NO PERMANENT DEPOSITORY ANYWHERE AND ONCE WE GET IT...IT’S HERE.

KUNZ: BUT ALLEN SAYS NUCLEAR RESEARCH MUST GO ON. AND ACCORDING TO HIM, TEMPORARY STORAGE AT NUCLEAR POWER PLANTS IS SAFE, THANKS TO THE RESEARCH THEY DO HERE IN IDAHO.

ALLEN: IT IS SOMETHING THAT WE DO HAVE TO SOLVE EVENTUALLY BECAUSE PEOPLE WOULD PREFER THAT IT GOES TO A SINGLE REPOSITORY THAN HAVING MULTIPLE STORAGE LOCATIONS ACROSS THE COUNTRY. BUT I DON’T THINK IT’S REALLY A SAFETY ISSUE AS MUCH AS AN ISSUE THAT WE NEED TO SOLVE. BUT I DO THINK, IF WE ARE GOING TO BE THE IDAHO NATIONAL LABORATORY, THEN WE NEED TO BE ABLE TO LOOK AT THESE TYPES OF RESEARCH ISSUES. AND IF WE CAN’T IT, WILL DRIFT TO SOME OTHER PLACE IN THE COUNTRY BECAUSE THEY ARE QUESTIONS THAT NEED TO BE ANSWERED.

KUNZ: THAT IS THE REASON GOVERNOR OTTER SAYS HE IS WILLING TO ALLOW 50 COMMERCIAL RODS TO COME TO IDAHO. IT STRENGTHENS THE ROLE OF THE INL.

GOV. C.L. “BUTCH” OTTER: I JUST WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT I FULLY UNDERSTAND GOVERNOR ANDRUS’S FRUSTRATION AND I UNDERSTAND THAT GOVERNOR BATT WANTS TO PROTECT ONE OF HIS LEGACIES. AND CERTAINLY HIS LEGACY, THE ONLY ONE IN THE NATION, WAS THAT AGREEMENT. BUT I’M DEALING IN A MUCH DIFFERENT ENVIRONMENT, IN A MUCH DIFFERENT SITUATION TODAY.

KUNZ: FOR IDAHO SCIENCE JOURNAL, I’M AARON KUNZ.

FUNDING FOR IDAHO SCIENCE JOURNAL WAS PROVIDED BY THE NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION IDAHO EPSCoR PROGRAM AND BY THE NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION.