



Project Nutmeg: The Birth of the Nevada Test Site

Introduction

Following the Trinity test and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, military officials still knew very little about the effects, especially on naval targets, of nuclear weapons. Accordingly, the Joint Chiefs of Staff requested and received Presidential approval to conduct a test series during summer 1946. The test series, named Crossroads, was conducted at Bikini atoll in the Marshall Islands, which was far from population centers in the middle of the Pacific. Pacific testing offered ample protected anchorage for both a target fleet and support ships, but as a test site, it held two drawbacks: the distance

from the continental United States made extraordinary logistical demands; and the humid climate created numerous problems for sophisticated electronic and photographic equipment.



Alamogordo-White Sands, New Mexico, was a possible choice for a continental atomic proving ground.

The Nevada Test Site story begins in 1948 after the atomic test series Operation Sandstone in the Enewetak atoll. Although Sandstone was successful, logistics, weather, security and safety concerns during the operation illustrated the need for a continental test site. The logistical problems associated with transporting, supplying, and housing a nuclear testing task force in the middle of the Pacific were self-evident. Combined with the communist insurgency in Korea, the

need for a continental test site had become urgent. As a result, the Armed Forces Special Weapons Project conducted a top secret feasibility study, named Nutmeg, to search for a continental test site. The study concluded that the arid-Southwest section of the United States was an ideal location.

Choices

During the initial study in 1948, several sites were surveyed and considered for the establishment of an atomic testing ground, including: Alamogordo-White Sands, New Mexico; Dugway Proving Ground, Utah; Las Vegas Bombing and Gunnery Range, Nevada; Central Nevada, and Camp LeJeune, North Carolina.



President Harry Truman approves the choice for a continental atomic proving ground in Southern Nevada.



Two Sites Vie for Testing

A subsequent study concluded that two general areas in Nevada, designated as the north site and the south site, met the criteria for a proving ground. The south site, almost 70 miles northwest of Las Vegas, had significant advantages over the north site, located approximately 35 miles southeast of Tonopah. At the south site, natural barriers screened the proposed test area from public viewing and permitted better security enforcement. The south site, which was within the confines of the U.S. Air Force Las Vegas Bombing and Gunnery Range, was in a remote location. The largest area population (25,000) was in downtown Las Vegas. Meteorological conditions were shown to be excellent for radiological safety in restricting the areas down-wind, which would be contaminated from radiological fallout.

In 1950, a more complete survey of the south site, amid the Las Vegas Bombing and Gunnery Range, was conducted and resulted in test officials' endorsements. In December, the United States Air Force, landlord of the site, approved the plan to allow the Atomic Energy Commission to use the range for a proposed series of continental tests, code named Ranger. On December 18, President Harry Truman approved the choice. Following the Ranger series, the Atomic Energy Commission swiftly moved to turn the Nevada Test Site into a permanent proving ground for nuclear weapons.

Today, after 50-plus years of service, the Nevada Test Site continues to play an integral part in national defense, assuring the nation's nuclear weapons stockpile, providing first responder training, and providing cutting-edge technology to better protect our nation and its citizens.



The first series of atomic tests at the newly christened Nevada Proving Ground occurred in 1951 as part of Operation Ranger.

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