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EDITORIAL:

Nevada grateful for Halstead's many years fighting nuclear waste

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On this Labor Day, the Sun salutes a recently retired Nevada leader whose three decades of tireless public service unquestionably made a difference in our state. Bob Halstead, who stepped down last month as the executive director for the Nevada Agency for Nuclear Projects, will be long remembered for his staunch defense of the state against the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository project. It's scary to think where Nevada might be today if not for Halstead and his guard-dogging against the federal government's attempts to shove the nation's high-level nuclear waste down our throats.

Halstead was the state's foremost expert on the project, a walking encyclopedia of its many flaws. His credibility, geniality and commitment allowed him to work with Republican and Democratic governors, Nevada congressional delegates, state legislators and local officials alike.

That helped forge a unified front on the project that continues to this day. Outside of a few misguided officials, it's difficult to find a Nevada leader who wants anything to do with Yucca Mountain.

Halstead also spearheaded the state's response to the feds' 2018 secret shipments of weapons-grade plutonium to the Nevada National Security Site, among other efforts.

Along the way, he became a nemesis of the Department of Energy, beating them back with legal and scientific challenges and poking their arguments full of holes.

He technically retired in July, but — true to form — continued to work into late August to take care of unfinished business and get his office ready for new leadership. Now, he's back at his family's home in Wisconsin.

In a statement placed in the Congressional Record, Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev., spoke to Halstead's contribution to the state.

"Before coming to the Senate, I had the pleasure of working alongside Bob during my time as the Nevada attorney general," she said. "No matter the day or hour, Bob always made time to review materials and provide well-informed, robust responses not just to me, but to my staff.

"It was comforting knowing someone with his exceptional experience was at the helm, guiding the state on an issue that is so important to Nevadans, and trying to right the wrongs of the federal government's reckless mismanagement of nuclear waste."

Nevada Rep. Dina Titus praised Halstead as a "tireless advocate" in the fight to keep nuclear waste out of Nevada.

"His expertise about the technical issues related to Yucca Mountain is second to none," Titus said in an emailed statement to the Sun. "I don't think the Department of Energy will miss him, but Nevada sure will."

Patrick Donnelly, the Nevada state director for the Center for Biological Diversity, said Halstead's efforts helped result in the defense of Yucca Mountain becoming "one of the more astounding acts of environmental resistance in modern history." It's certainly been an impressive fight, and a long one. It dates to 1987, when Congress passed the so-called "Screw Nevada" bill that designated our state as the national waste repository site — without our consent.

Since then, the project has been killed and resurrected repeatedly, most recently when the Trump administration pushed for funding to restart the licensing process. When President Donald Trump finally capitulated, it was a high point for Halstead after a career of bedeviling pro-Yucca presidents, bureaucrats and Congress members who were intent on shipping waste out of their own districts and dumping it on Nevada.

But as Halstead has noted, the fight isn't over. It won't be until there's legislation that permanently shuts down the site.

With Halstead's departure, that means the current and next generations of Nevada leaders will have to take up the cause just as fervently as he did.

We simply can't let down our guard on this monstrosity, which would result in more than 110,000 metric tons of highly radioactive waste being shipped into the backyard of Las Vegas and stored there. Transporting the material is dangerous, especially for Las Vegas, given that one of the main routes takes shipments directly through the heart of the city. Think about the effects of an accident or a terrorist attack on a shipment going through the middle of Las Vegas.

As for storage, seismic activity in the region makes Yucca Mountain a terrible place to put this waste. A leak could contaminate groundwater for thousands of years — and keep in mind that we're talking about enough material to cover a football field about seven yards deep.

There's nothing close to scientific proof that the waste could be safely stored in the repository for the tens of thousands of years it will remain radioactive.

Halstead knew this, and for 30 years he refused to yield on it. Now, he plans to spend his time with his wife and their adult children, and go fishing as often as he can.

Hopefully, this Labor Day will find him with a line in the water. With his decades of work for Nevada, he's earned his relaxation time.