

Yucca Mountain bill hijacks Nevada's authority

By Judy Treichel

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When John Glenn was serving in the U.S. Senate, after his time as an astronaut, he had an aide who had done some nuclear waste research work for grassroots groups. When the aide briefed Sen. Glenn on the status of nuclear power and the fact that there was no solution for the waste, the senator said something like, "Wow, that would be like if they had shot me off into space with a promise of figuring how to get me back down while I was on the mission."



Seemingly everyone now agrees that it was a mistake to begin generating nuclear waste before having a safe means of permanent disposal. But mistakes should be learning experiences, and it has become clear that there have been very few lessons learned.

Nuclear waste began being produced in the 1940s and now, 70 years later, after a few well-intentioned starts, the attempts to form a workable national nuclear waste policy have failed politically and scientifically because they never started or progressed democratically.

The original Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982 set out a plan to scientifically determine a suitable site, but it was sorely lacking in public involvement and publicly influenced decision-making. The result: delays and disputes around the country when people discovered that the Department of Energy was planning to check them out for nuclear waste disposal. The impending failure led to the Amendments Act of 1987 which simply put a tack in a map declaring the repository site to be Yucca Mountain. After more than 20 years of bureaucratic warfare between the commercial nuclear industry, the federal government and the state of Nevada, the DOE declared the Yucca Mountain Project to be unworkable. It was and still is.

Now, after another seven years of studies, analyses and government commission reports, instead of following the only path proven to be successful anywhere in the world — public participation in a voluntary process — the Trump administration and Secretary of Energy Rick Perry have decided to intensify the war against Nevada.

In what was already a David and Goliath sort of battle, some members of Congress have decided that the stones Nevada is slinging at the DOE, are too big and possibly deadly. The answer was proposed legislation that would make Nevada the only state in the union without the ability to determine how its water would be used and its air protected. We would become the only state without the ability to deny water appropriation deemed not in the public interest, and we would be unable to regulate air quality at Yucca Mountain.

These provisions and a few others were so distasteful to a few of the members of the Congressional committee considering the bill that they were deleted ... for now. HR3053 passed out of the House Energy and Commerce Committee and will now go on to the Senate where we hope that cooler and much fairer heads will prevail.

Many countries in the world have had a difficult time finding solutions to nuclear waste disposal. Most had to fail first, study where they went wrong and begin again.

A few looked at unsuccessful efforts elsewhere and began with a good program. Finland has undertaken a repository program that sought volunteer communities and includes ample time for public input. After a failed attempt, Sweden is now in the approval process for a program very similar to that in Finland. Canada is working with the public in the hopes it can develop a successful high-level waste repository program. Currently, proponents there are meeting obstacles in their efforts to license a mid-level repository that is opposed by people both in Canada and the U.S. because it is located very near Lake Huron.

As I watched the congressional hearing and the attempts to overwhelm Nevada and force a repository at Yucca Mountain, one of the more bizarre moments was when an amendment was offered, passionately supported and unanimously approved that opposed Canada's siting of the mid-level nuclear waste repository near the Great Lakes. The members of the committee who live in states that draw their drinking water from any of the Great Lakes were outraged at the thought of nuclear waste nearby. All that indignation but they had no understanding of the farmers and residents in Amargosa Valley, people in and near Death Valley and the Western Shoshone, who know that their sacred water will become contaminated with radiation eventually.

The argument is not "if" but "when."

Judy Treichel is the executive director of the Nevada Nuclear Waste Task Force.

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If we are honest we must acknowledge that some of the processes that create nuclear waste are uniquely destructive and others are uniquely lifesaving. The stuff itself has done very little harm.

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