

THE DAILY CALLER

Trump's Interior Secretary May Be The Key To Opening Yucca Mountain

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A decision by Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke to shrink two Nevada national monuments could remove a significant hurdle to storing nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain, experts say.

"Downsizing of the monument would be a good thing as it would increase Yucca Mountain transportation options," Lake Barrett, former deputy director of the Department of Energy's Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management, told The Daily Caller News Foundation.

"However there are many transportation options available, so this is not a critical issue compared to other issues that need to be resolved," Barrett said.

Zinke is touring the 704,000 acre Basin and Range National Monument that spans two southeastern Nevada counties. Currently, the monument partially blocks the Department of Energy's proposed rail route for nuclear waste shipments to Yucca Mountain.

Some nuclear energy experts suspect one reason former President Barack Obama designated the monument in 2015 was to block any chance of Yucca Mountain being used to store spent nuclear fuel. The Obama administration typically sided with former Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada, Yucca's staunchest opponent, when it came to storing nuclear waste.

Obama designated the Basin and Range National Monument under the Antiquities Act of 1906. The measure gives the president the authority to designate public lands as national monuments without congressional approval.

"The perception is that the Basin and Range National Monument was enacted by the Obama Administration to thwart transportation to Yucca Mountain," David Blee, executive director of the Nuclear Infrastructure Council, told The Daily Caller News Foundation.

"We are confident that the Trump Administration — which supports Yucca Mountain — will do what is necessary and appropriate to smooth any hurdle to this pressing national priority," Blee said.

Trump's budget calls for \$120 million to restart licensing activities for the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste facility. The White House argues that building Yucca would reduce the hazard of nuclear waste, enhance national security and save taxpayers billions of dollars. Without a permanent storage facility, nuclear power plants have limited options to store spent fuel, leaving the federal government with \$50 billion in legal liabilities.

"All in all this is a red herring issue," Blee said. "The Monument is not a show-stopper. There are multiple approaches to transporting material to Yucca that avoid Las Vegas including a north-south route that is appealing and workable."

The Obama administration delayed Yucca for years. The Department of Energy submitted its proposal to build Yucca Mountain in June of 2008, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) determined in 2014 that the site met safety standards. The NRC [released a report last May](#) that claimed the Yucca Mountain site would not adversely impact the environment over a one million year period.

“Even so, any shipping campaign will be low volume with as few as 50 shipments a year and safe with thousand of comparable shipments successfully completed over millions of miles with no harm to public health and safety,” Blee said.

Obama’s opposition to Yucca drew widespread criticism, with even The Washington Post labeling it a policy disaster. The WaPo editorial is part of a growing media trend. The Chicago Tribune editorial board implored Trump in April to clean up the nuclear waste storage debacle his predecessor left.

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