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Yucca Mountain debate rekindled



Bill Theobald, USA Today 1:16 p.m. PDT March 25, 2015



(Photo: RGJ file)

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WASHINGTON — Washington is suddenly awash again in talk about the sticky problem of nuclear waste disposal, and what to do about the Yucca Mountain site.

Freshman Nevada Rep. Cresent Hardy may have kicked off this latest round with his [open letter Sunday in the Las Vegas Review-Journal](#) calling for an "honest conversation" about the pros and cons of storing waste at Yucca Mountain — something Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid has repeatedly vowed to prevent.

But the issue received additional attention this week with the introduction of bipartisan legislation in the Senate that outlines a plan for disposing of spent nuclear fuel and military waste, and a speech by Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz describing a shift in the Obama administration's approach to the issue.



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Proponents of using the Yucca Mountain site were heard from as well.

The Nuclear Waste Administration Act was introduced Tuesday by Sens. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska; Maria Cantwell, D-Wash.; Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn.; and Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif.

It would create an independent agency to manage the country's nuclear waste program, taking that duty away from the Energy Department. The agency's administrator would be appointed by the president and subject to Senate confirmation.

The legislation directs the agency to build a pilot storage facility to hold spent fuel from plants, and additional facilities for temporary storage of non-priority spent fuel or military waste, and repositories for permanent storage.

The choice of sites would be "consent-based" — meaning the communities would have to approve of the projects.

After 10 years, new storage facilities could be built only if at least one site has been selected for evaluation as a potential permanent repository.

"The United States desperately needs a comprehensive nuclear waste policy,"

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Feinstein said. "We simply cannot allow spent nuclear fuel to remain indefinitely at sites scattered throughout the country — awaiting a clear path forward."

Alexander, a strong proponent of nuclear power, has been adamant that the Yucca Mountain project needs to move forward, even if alternative waste sites are built.

"The new sites we'd seek to establish — would not take the place of Yucca Mountain — we have more than enough waste to fill Yucca Mountain to its legal capacity — but rather would complement it," Alexander said recently.

Moniz, in a speech at the Bipartisan Policy Center Tuesday, announced that the Energy Department would begin planning for a separate repository for military nuclear waste.

Some military waste is less radioactive and easier to handle than commercial waste, Energy Department officials said, which means a repository could have a simpler design and fewer licensing and transportation challenges.

Some House Republicans reacted harshly to the announcement.

"DOE's plan to spin off defense waste from the broader nuclear material storage debate is a red herring," said Rep. John Shimkus, R-Ill. "It's no coincidence that this announcement comes after (Hardy's op-ed) and a marked shift in momentum toward continuing licensing of a central geologic repository."

Rep. Fred Upton, R-Mich., chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, said, he has "real concerns with pursuing a secondary site for military waste."

"Doing so is likely to cast aside the Yucca site with years of work and billions of dollars spent. Yucca Mountain remains the most viable solution for our nation's nuclear waste policy and it comes with the scientific community's seal of approval," Upton said.

USA TODAY reporter Mary Troyan contributed to this story.

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