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Nuclear industry envisions expansion of Yucca project

77,000-ton capacity seen as 'artificial limit'

By [STEVE TETREAULT STEPHENS WASHINGTON BUREAU](#)

WASHINGTON -- The nuclear power industry plans to lobby Congress this year to remove the cap on how much nuclear waste could be stored at Yucca Mountain, a trade association official said Thursday.

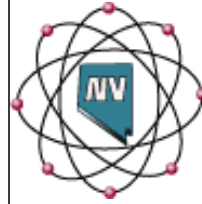
With all available space likely to be claimed by the time the proposed Nevada waste repository opens, a 77,000-ton capacity set by Congress in a 1982 law "eventually is going to stand in the way" of industry growth, said Steve Kraft, a senior director at the Nuclear Energy Institute.

Kraft said the capacity is an "artificial limit" set through politics. The 1982 law requires the Department of Energy to report to Congress between 2007 and 2010 on the need for additional capacity, or perhaps a second repository.

Kraft said the industry does not plan to suggest a new ceiling for Yucca Mountain storage but noted that DOE environmental studies have said the repository could hold 105,000 tons of spent nuclear fuel. Some scientists believe the mountain could hold more depending on its design.

About 50,000 tons of spent fuel is stored at commercial reactor sites, and plants continue to generate 2,000 tons of waste each year, industry figures indicate. Another 12,000 metric tons of government-generated waste also awaits disposal at Yucca Mountain.

"We know that nuclear energy is going to expand, so (the capacity limit) needs to be dealt with," Kraft said in a briefing on the institute's Yucca Mountain goals this year.



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The Nuclear Energy Institute staked out positions on probable Yucca Mountain issues in Congress this year as the Bush administration prepares to send lawmakers a bill expected in the next few weeks to jump-start the delayed nuclear waste program.

Paul Golan, the DOE's acting nuclear waste director, said earlier this month that the bill will address Yucca funding and will propose to formally claim 147,000 acres of public land surrounding the site.

Golan said other provisions were being considered, but he declined to disclose them.

Trade publications citing unnamed sources have reported that the bill might call for establishing federal sites where nuclear waste can be stored temporarily while Yucca Mountain work continues.

Kraft said moving nuclear waste away from power plants and onto some federal site, be it Yucca Mountain or elsewhere, "is our number one goal, our number one issue."

Among other legislation sought by the trade group:

- A rate freeze on payments by utilities into the nuclear waste fund that pays for the repository. Companies pay one mil (\$.001) per kilowatt hour of electricity generated by nuclear plants. The fund contains about \$20 billion.
- Accounting changes for the nuclear waste fund to let Congress appropriate more for repository construction. The industry has tried before but failed to persuade lawmakers to make the change, but it wants to try again.
- Repeal of a Nuclear Regulatory Commission "waste confidence" regulation that industry officials believe might complicate licensing for new power plants.

Kraft said the rule, which governs how the NRC weighs nuclear waste issues in reactor license applications and waste storage permits, has become outdated since Congress voted in 2002 to move forward on a Yucca Mountain repository.

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