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Federal panel to examine nuclear waste storage

Yucca Mountain won't be included in options

STEPHENS WASHINGTON BUREAU

By STEVE TETREAULT

WASHINGTON -- The Obama administration continued its march away from Yucca Mountain on Friday with the naming of a 15-member panel of experts to chart new paths to manage highly radioactive nuclear waste.

The commission will be led by two Washington policy veterans, former Rep. Lee Hamilton and longtime presidential adviser Brent Scowcroft, the Energy Department announced.

Other members are well known, including former Sens. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., and Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., former high-ranking government energy officials, and representatives of the nuclear industry, organized labor, environmental groups and academia.

The Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Nuclear Future will be given two years to do its work. A draft report will be due in 18 months.

Energy Secretary Steven Chu said the commission will have a free hand to examine a "full range of scientific and technical options" on waste storage, reprocessing and disposal, with one exception: the once-favored Yucca Mountain underground repository.

Talking with reporters, Chu and chief White House energy adviser Carol Browner made it clear that the Nevada site, which had been the government's sole focus for more than 20 years, is off the table.

"The debate over Yucca Mountain is over, as the president has made clear many times," said Browner, director of the White House Office of Energy and Climate Change Policy.

"It is time to move forward with a new strategy based on the best science and the advice of a broad range of experts," Browner said.

Hamilton said Chu made it "quite clear that nuclear waste storage at Yucca Mountain is not an option, and that the blue ribbon commission will be looking at better alternatives."

The idea of storing, and ultimately burying, nuclear spent fuel underground is outdated, Hamilton said, adding, "It has been made clear to me that science has advanced dramatically since the Yucca site was chosen 20 years ago or so. We are going to pull together the current information and research to develop a plan."

The naming of a commission is believed to be another step in the dismantlement of the Yucca Mountain Project, which long has been a lightning rod among environmentalists and many people in

Nevada, including virtually all the state's elected leaders.

The project was envisioned as a warren of tunnels deep inside Yucca Mountain, 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas, where at least 77,000 tons of spent fuel from commercial plants, and government-generated nuclear waste, would be stored and ultimately buried.

The cost had grown to almost \$100 billion and fell more than a decade beyond schedule because of a series of management missteps, legal challenges and budget cuts engineered by opponents in Congress.

The next step down could come on Monday when the Obama administration releases its proposed 2011 federal budget. The budget is expected to contain only token funding for the program.

Its downfall traces to an alliance between Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., and President Barack Obama, who pledged early in his White House campaign to end the repository and has kept his promises so far.

Reid said Chu assembled "some of the smartest people in the country" for the commission.

"President Obama and I have worked closely to stop dumping taxpayer money into Yucca, and I have fought hard to ensure Yucca Mountain is dead," Reid said. "This panel of experts proposing other options for nuclear waste is the logical next step in that process."

Other Nevadans in Congress echoed the sentiment.

Democratic Rep. Shelley Berkley said Obama was fulfilling his promise to end the repository project. Democratic Rep. Dina Titus said the commission means "we are closer than ever to ensuring Yucca Mountain never becomes a reality."

Bruce Breslow, executive director of the Agency for Nuclear Projects, said formation of the panel was encouraging, but the state's fight against the project would end only when the Department of Energy withdraws a repository license application under review at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Chu, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist, said Friday that it is time to look ahead. Solving the nuclear waste problem is important to the goal adopted by the administration to promote nuclear power as a response to climate change.

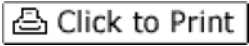
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BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION ON AMERICA'S NUCLEAR FUTURE

- Co-chairman: Former Rep. Lee Hamilton of Indiana. President and director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and director of The Center on Congress at Indiana University
- Co-chairman: Brent Scowcroft, president, The Scowcroft Group, an international business advisory firm
- Mark Ayers, president, Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO
- Vicky Bailey, former commissioner, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission; former Department of Energy assistant secretary for policy and international affairs
- Albert Carnesale, chancellor emeritus and professor, UCLA
- Pete V. Domenici, senior fellow, Bipartisan Policy Center; former U.S. senator from New Mexico
- Susan Eisenhower, president, Eisenhower Group
- Chuck Hagel, former U.S. senator from Nebraska
- Jonathan Lash, president, World Resources Institute
- Allison Macfarlane, associate professor of environmental science and policy, George Mason University
- Dick Meserve, former chairman, Nuclear Regulatory Commission
- Ernie Moniz, professor of physics and Cecil & Ida Green Distinguished Professor, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- Per Peterson, professor and chairman, Department of Nuclear Engineering, University of California-Berkeley
- John Rowe, chairman and chief executive officer, Exelon Corp.
- Phil Sharp, president, Resources for the Future

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