



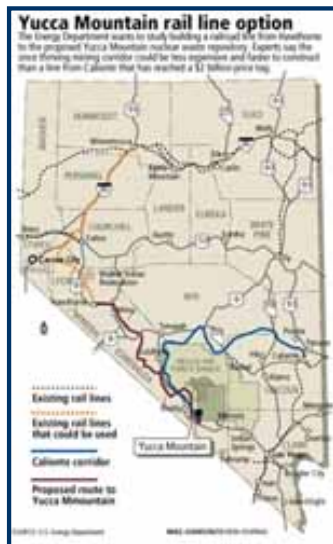
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## YUCCA MOUNTAIN: DOE eyes old rail plan

### Nuclear waste would travel western path

By STEVE TETREULT © 2006 STEPHENS WASHINGTON BUREAU



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**WASHINGTON** -- Facing a \$2 billion price tag to build a railroad from eastern Nevada to Yucca Mountain, the Energy Department wants to take a new look at shipping nuclear waste by rail through the western part of the state to the proposed repository site, local, federal and industry officials said.

Department officials want to examine a path along Union Pacific Railroad track south from Winnemucca, crossing east of Fallon, through the Walker River Indian Reservation to

Hawthorne.

From there, a rail line would be built along an abandoned Southern Pacific Railroad bed to a location five miles north of Mina in Mineral County, then generally south through or near Tonopah and Goldfield and along the western edge of the Nellis Air Force Range to the Yucca site, according to alignments DOE identified in the 1980s and early 1990s.

The Energy Department placed the Mina route on the back burner in 1991 when the Walker River Paiute Tribe served notice it would not allow nuclear waste to be moved through its reservation.

But the tribe recently withdrew its long-held objections, DOE officials said, prompting department lawyers to explore how the route might be re-evaluated for shipping high-level radioactive waste.



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Transportation experts said early studies indicated a rail line 209 miles from Mina to Yucca Mountain could be much less expensive and faster to build than a 319-mile rail corridor originating in Caliente that DOE is characterizing in an environmental impact study.

In the fall, DOE revised its cost estimate for a Caliente rail line from \$880 million initially to about \$2 billion.

On the Mina route, experts said DOE could take advantage of alignments where rail once served thriving mining operations.

Also, the DOE would need to negotiate several mountainous areas crossing the range from Caliente, but the Mina alignment is largely within valleys except for a challenging grade at Railroad Pass, said Bob Halstead, a transportation consultant for Nevada.

"Given what we know about terrain, land use ownership and land use conflicts, if the Walker River Paiute Tribe allows (DOE) to transverse the reservation, then this route would certainly appear to be less difficult than Caliente," Halstead said.

The views of the Nevada consultant were echoed by several nuclear industry executives who asked not to be identified so as not to cross DOE.

"Bottom line is (the government) could save a billion dollars," Halstead said.

But nuclear waste from power plants in the East would travel across a larger swath of Northern and western Nevada under the Mina option. It could bring nuclear waste trains within 50 miles of Reno and Carson City where public interest in the Yucca Mountain project has not been as pronounced as in Las Vegas.

"I think this will exercise people in Northern Nevada much more than they have been," said Bob Loux, director of the Nevada Agency for Nuclear Projects.

Shifting focus to western Nevada also could complicate DOE relations with officials in Lincoln County such as Caliente

Mayor Kevin Phillips who have been the department's strongest allies in Nevada in hopes of landing a waste transfer station and other economic opportunities.

"I am not going to jump on that horse," Phillips said of the prospect that DOE might turn elsewhere. "We ought to let the process work its way out, and I will make a decision from there on what I would do or not do."

"Any route that would be reasonable must be investigated, so (DOE) is going to investigate," Phillips said.

DOE spokesman Allen Benson said the Walker River Paiutes told DOE by letter on May 4 that they were withdrawing opposition to studying nuclear waste transportation by rail across their reservation.

"We are considering the new information provided by the tribe and are analyzing our options," Benson said. "There have been some meetings with the tribe. We are once again in the process of looking at it, but until we know more, there is nothing more to say."

The Caliente corridor "is in the mix also," Benson said.

Industry and government officials said the DOE general counsel's office was researching whether the Caliente environmental impact study legally could be expanded to characterize the Mina route too.

One DOE official described the legal work as preliminary, and the department could take weeks or longer before it reaches any conclusions.

Gary Lanthrum, the DOE's transportation director for Yucca Mountain, was asked about the Mina route during a May 23 meeting in Pahrump that was attended by nuclear and transportation industry executives and officials from rural counties.

Lanthrum said the leadership of the Walker River Paiutes changed in December, and the tribal council subsequently withdrew its opposition, "and so the route can now be considered," according to notes kept by an attendee that were shared with the Review-Journal.

Genia Williams, who was elected chairwoman of the Walker

River Paiutes in 2005, said DOE's account "is not entirely accurate." Williams said the tribe would comment further in writing, but a statement was unavailable by deadline.

Tribal officials have told DOE in meetings they want a new rail line built through the northern part of their reservation so that high-level explosives sent to the nearby Hawthorne Army Ammunition Depot and possible nuclear waste shipments would avoid the town of Schurz, according to the May 4 letter obtained by the Review-Journal.

The Walker River Paiutes thought that nuclear waste might be destined to travel through the reservation one way or another.

"We understand that if rail shipments are not allowed, nuclear waste may still be shipped through the reservation by truck," according to the tribe's letter, which was signed by Williams. "Our intent in allowing the (environmental impact study) is to determine if shipments on the railroad would be less dangerous than shipments by truck through Schurz."

Adding Mina to the environmental impact statement could add between eight months to a year to the study, which has been delayed for months, said a transportation industry official who asked not to be identified.

Government officials also are said to be awaiting the outcome of a lawsuit that Nevada filed against DOE over the Caliente corridor.

If the judges order DOE to make changes, that could open the way for the Mina route to be considered, said attorneys following the case.

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