

Why new national monument could derail plans for nuke dump at Yucca

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Carson City —

President Barack Obama's [designation](#) Friday of a portion of rural Nevada as a national monument apparently creates a roadblock for a nuclear dump 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas at Yucca Mountain.

"This is the final nail in the coffin," said Robert Halstead, executive director of the state Agency for Nuclear Projects, regarding the Energy Department's plans to transport waste from Caliente to the dump via railroad.

He said the proposed 300-mile route of the railroad would go through the newly created Basin and Range National Monument, which is 700,000 acres of mountains and valleys about two hours from Las Vegas that feature "rock art" dating back 4,000 years.

"This really complicates life for the (Nuclear Regulatory Commission)," Halstead said. The NRC must approve the waste dump.

Obama called the area "an invaluable treasure for our nation and will continue to serve as an irreplaceable resource for archaeologists, historians and ecologists for generations to come."

Halstead said the Department of Energy looked at nine railroad routes to carry the high-level radioactive waste and narrowed them down to the Caliente-to-Yucca Mountain route, which would run through the monument area.

He said a railroad would mar the monument's ecological tourism potential and disrupt some of the area's longtime ranchers.

The railroad project would cost an estimated \$3 billion.

Halstead's agency has opposed the rail route from the start.

"We've been fighting this for 10 years," he said.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission must decide whether to go forward with the nuclear dump, which the state has been fighting for more than two decades.

The state has 218 challenges launched with the NRC, four of which involve the alignment of the proposed rail line.

Not only would the NRC have to approve the route but so would a federal railroad agency.

Obama said the area is a habitat for game species including the desert bighorn sheep, mule deer, Rocky Mountain elk and pronghorn.

The Energy Department has not completed its environmental study of the railroad, Halstead said.