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Trump's pick for Energy chief says Yucca Mountain can't be ruled out



Energy Secretary-designate, former Texas Gov. Rick Perry, testifies at his confirmation hearing before the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee on Capitol Hill in Washington, Thursday, Jan. 19, 2017. (Erik Verduzco/Las Vegas Review-Journal) @Erik_Verduzco

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By GARY MARTIN

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WASHINGTON — Former Texas Gov. Rick Perry, tapped by President-elect Donald Trump to head the Energy Department, left open Thursday the possibility that Yucca Mountain could house nuclear waste in the future.

Perry told the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee that he understood the position of Nevada's bipartisan congressional delegation and Gov. Brian Sandoval that the facility should be mothballed because of intense opposition.

But Perry would not rule out consideration of Yucca Mountain for future use.

Under questioning by U.S. Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev., Perry said he was open to looking at storage sites outside "what we have historically looked at before."

If confirmed, Perry said he would seek a permanent solution to the nuclear waste storage problem that has lingered for three decades.

"I am very aware that this is an issue this country has been flummoxed by for 30 years. We have spent billions of dollars on this issue," Perry said, adding: "I'll work closely with you and the members of this committee to find the answers to this issue."

Cortez Masto reminded Perry that, as a presidential candidate in 2011, during a debate in Las Vegas, he favored consent-based siting and noted local opposition to Yucca Mountain as a repository.

Perry told Cortez Masto he understood "where you all are coming from," but he said he would also follow the law.

Under a federal law passed in 1987, the Nye County site remains designated as the permanent repository for the waste.

Experts say the cost to redevelop the site and prepare for underground disposal of nuclear wastes would be in excess of \$30 billion.

Yucca Mountain is located about 90 miles north of Las Vegas. President Barack Obama stopped construction at the Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Repository in 2011 at the behest of former Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid of Nevada.

But pressure is building to store 84,250 tons of spent fuel assemblies from commercial reactors. Politicians in states with reactors that generate the waste are seeking a place for storage.

During the hearing, Perry touted his experience with the "difficult challenges of transporting and storing low-level waste in my home state of Texas."

Waste Control Specialists LLC of Texas has a license application pending before the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to establish an interim storage site in Andrews County, north of Odessa.

“There are some other places in this country that are willing to have this conversation,” Perry told the committee, adding that he was repeatedly re-elected governor of Texas despite his support for nuclear waste storage in the state.

Perry also pledged to continue Energy Department cleanup at the Nevada National Security Site, also located north of Las Vegas. The site was established in 1951 to test nuclear weapons.

The Energy Department is conducting a cleanup of contaminated groundwater and low-level nuclear waste.

Perry is expected to be easily confirmed by the Senate. The hearing was peppered with light moments as Perry charmed Democratic lawmakers and bantered with Republican supporters on the panel.

U.S. Sen. Al Franken, D-Minn., asked Perry if he enjoyed meeting him at his Senate office.

Perry responded: “I hope you are as much fun on the dais as you were on your couch.”

After howls of laughter, Perry asked: “Can I rephrase that, sir?”

Franken replied: “Please. Please. Oh my Lord. Oh my Lord.”

Perry also said in his opening remarks that he regrets saying in a presidential debate in 2011 that he would eliminate the Energy Department if elected to serve in the White House.

It was the “oops” moment. Perry could not remember the name of the department, a gaffe that sealed his fate as an also-ran in a GOP primary battle later won by Mitt Romney of Utah.

“My past statements made over five years ago about abolishing the Department of Energy do not reflect my current thinking,” Perry said. “I regret recommending its elimination.”

Perry also reversed his stance on climate change, which he once described as a “phony mess” that hindered economic growth.

Trump has called climate change a hoax. But Perry conceded the climate is changing and “some of it is also caused by manmade activity. The question is how do we address it.”

U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell of Washington, the ranking Democrat on the Energy Committee, pressed Perry on a questionnaire that was sent by the Trump transition team to department employees and particularly those involved in climate research.

Perry said the questionnaire was sent out before he was designated by Trump to head the department.

“I didn’t approve it, I don’t approve it, I didn’t need the information, I don’t want that information. That’s not how I manage,” Perry said.

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