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Nuclear waste solution must include Yucca Mountain, key GOP lawmaker says

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WASHINGTON — Yucca Mountain continues to be considered by a Republican lawmaker on a key congressional panel to be part of a comprehensive solution to the continuing problem of storing nuclear waste generated by power plants.

But some Nevada officials say it will take more than money to bring the designated facility north of Las Vegas into compliance to store waste that is being temporarily held at plants across the country.

Earlier this month, U.S. Rep. John Shimkus, R-Ill., chairman of the House Energy and Commerce subcommittee on environment, said that the federal government's failure to take possession of spent nuclear fuel has cost taxpayers \$30 billion.

Following a tour of the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station near San Diego, Shimkus, whose subcommittee oversees nuclear waste issues, said he planned to act during this Congress to resolve the problem.

Shimkus said he would “push for a comprehensive solution to nuclear waste management that would move spent nuclear fuel out of these communities in a timely manner and toward permanent disposal at Yucca Mountain, as decided by the federal government 30 years ago.”

Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval and the state's two U.S. Sens., Dean Heller and Catherine Cortez Masto, and U.S. Reps. Dina Titus, Ruben Kihuen and Jacky Rosen all oppose efforts to bring nuclear waste to Yucca Mountain, which is located just 90 miles north of Las Vegas.

U.S. taxpayers spent \$15 billion on the Yucca Mountain nuclear repository before former Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., enlisted the help of then-President Barack Obama to kill the project.

Cortez Masto, a member of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, said efforts to restart the project would be futile because of legal challenges, public opposition and cost.

"It will be a further waste of dollars if they are going to try to go down the path of opening Yucca Mountain, which is a hole in the ground," she told the Review-Journal.

"People seem to think that if you put the dollars back, you can flip the switch and all of a sudden you can put the waste there. That's not going to happen," she said. "It's not primed or ready to receive the waste."

President Donald Trump has nominated former Texas Gov. Rick Perry to head the Department of Energy.

During his confirmation hearing, Perry would not rule out Yucca Mountain as part of plans to store nuclear waste, but acknowledged opposition in the state to the facility. During his tenure as governor, Perry supported nuclear waste storage at a West Texas facility.

The Senate is expected to vote on the nomination by early next month. And the new administration's plans on nuclear waste storage would likely be unveiled in the proposed federal budget for fiscal year 2018, which is expected to be released soon.

Last month, a Nevada commission on nuclear waste sent a report to Sandoval warning that Congress would likely seek funding to revive the Yucca Mountain repository this year.

The 35-page report, prepared by Bob Halstead, executive director of the Nevada Agency for Nuclear Projects, said it was unsure whether the

Trump administration would support storing 77,000 tons of radioactive waste inside the Nye County mountain.

That report also noted that the Yucca Mountain project faces many hurdles before it could be granted a license by the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

The state of Nevada still has 218 “contentions” challenging the science of the repository plan before the NRC’s licensing panel that have been filed since the Obama administration defunded the project in 2011.

Two Nye County commissioners plan to meet with the state’s congressional delegation and key lawmakers later this month to discuss efforts to revive Yucca Mountain, to urge an expedited process that would allow the NRC to hear the science that is being challenged.

“We don’t advocate for Yucca Mountain, we advocate for the science,” said Dan Schinhofen, Nye County Commission chairman.

“We need to hear the science and follow the rule of law, and then we can discuss whether the project is safe or not,” he said.

Schinhofen of Pahrump and Nye County Commissioner Lorinda Wichman of Round Mountain will be in Washington this month.

Cortez Masto, a former state attorney general, said she brought many of the lawsuits challenging the disposal of waste at Yucca Mountain. She said the challenges alone will stop any development at the Nye County site, for the time being.

“The idea that this is something that is viable,” she said of restarting Yucca Mountain, is “mistaken.”

“We need to work with states that would be willing to accept some of this waste,” she said.

Even though Obama defunded construction, under a federal law passed in 1987, the Nye County site remains designated as the permanent repository for the waste.

Shimkus said the \$30 billion spent to temporarily store the waste will continue to grow.

“This number will continue to rapidly increase until the federal government fulfills its promise to local communities and ratepayers to permanently dispose of this material,” Shimkus said.

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