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Make Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste a Security Issue: Proponent

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By *Rebecca Kern*

The political logjam over Yucca Mountain should be broken by depicting the storage of nuclear waste there as a national-security issue, a leading Nevada proponent of the project says.

“If I could get in a room with President Donald Trump, what I would say is this a national security issue. The government made promises. They’ve taken money from ratepayers. There’s \$30 billion-plus sitting there. It’s time to follow the law,” said Dan Schinhofen, chairman of the Nye County Board of County of Commissioners, who represents the county where Yucca Mountain is located.

Other advocates of Yucca Mountain previously have cited national security as a reason for opening the site, even though much of the waste to be sent there comes from commercial nuclear plants and not federal defense facilities.

Those advocates say storing waste 1,000 feet underground on a remote federal facility on the Nevada Test Site, 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas, is more secure than parking it above ground at more than 100 commercial locations. They say some of those sites include closed reactors and several defense facilities, where temporary security precautions must be maintained in the absence of a permanent repository.

Critics of Yucca Mountain have expressed a preference for a “consent-based siting” process to find a willing host for the waste. But Schinhofen said that approach doesn’t work because “things change over election cycles,” with the potential for newly elected officials to shift their preferences on storage.

“So this just needs to be framed as a national-security issue,” he told Bloomberg BNA after speaking Feb. 24 at the Energy Communities Alliance meeting in Washington, featuring host communities of nuclear waste sites in the U.S.

Nevada Opposition Remains Strong

The Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982, which was later updated in 1987, designated Yucca Mountain as the location for a permanent geological repository for the nation's high-level nuclear waste, and money was collected from utility ratepayers under the assumption it would someday open there. In 2010, however, the Obama administration halted the Energy Department's work on a license for the site.

The Republican-controlled Congress has shown renewed interest for resuming work on Yucca Mountain this year. But Trump's nominee for secretary of Energy, Rick Perry, has said he is open to storing the nation's nuclear waste in other sites, including interim waste storage and other permanent repositories in willing host communities.

The biggest opponents to the project are Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval (R), and Nevada's two senators. Schinhofen said restarting the Nuclear Regulatory Commission adjudicatory hearing process would allow the opposition to voice their concerns.

They could move forward if Sandoval said, "fund the science, fund the NRC hearings, we want our contentions proven," he said. "If they can prove it, then let's go. Why else would they obfuscate it? Maybe they're not as sure about their science as they think."

Interim Storage Legislation

The nuclear energy industry says it supports consolidated interim storage of nuclear waste from commercial nuclear plants in conjunction with moving waste into Yucca Mountain as a permanent repository.

To fund an interim storage site, the Nuclear Energy Institute supports spending the approximately \$1.4 billion in annual interest from the Nuclear Waste Fund, Rod McCullum, NEI's senior director of used fuel and decommissioning, told Bloomberg BNA.

The fund was established in Nuclear Waste Policy Act for utilities to pay into to cover the cost of transporting spent nuclear fuel from nuclear reactors to a permanent repository. But after a lawsuit, payments into the fund stopped in May 2014. The Nuclear Waste Fund has a value of approximately \$46 billion, according to a 2016 Energy Department audit.

Reps. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.) and Mike Conaway (R-Texas), introduced legislation (H.R. 474) in January would allow the Energy Department to use the annual interest from Nuclear Waste Fund to pay for interim storage and could have the agency begin collecting nuclear waste in these short-term facilities in as little as five years.

Separately, Rep. John Shimkus (R-Ill.), chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee's Environment Subcommittee, said he's considering as part of a larger nuclear waste bill this Congress to create a federal funding stream for to pay for interim storage. One option he's considering is using a portion of the Nuclear Waste Fund to pay for interim storage. But he said he'd prefer to fund it through a separate appropriations process, which his subcommittee's legislation could authorize.

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