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Senate confirms Perry to head Energy Department

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WASHINGTON — Former Texas Gov. Rick Perry was overwhelmingly confirmed by the Senate on Thursday to head the Department of Energy and its nuclear programs, including waste disposal.

The Senate voted 62-37 to confirm the affable Texan, who after leaving public elected office appeared on the television series “Dancing With The Stars.”

Nevada Sens. Dean Heller, a Republican, and Catherine Cortez Masto, a Democrat, voted for confirmation.

Perry famously forgot during a 2011 presidential debate that the DOE was one of the federal departments he wanted to eliminate to cut the bureaucracy and save money.

But he was nominated by President Donald Trump to oversee the department that manages laboratories and technology centers to address energy, environmental and nuclear challenges.

Previous secretaries of the department have had science backgrounds and advanced degrees. Perry told the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee that his strength was running a large state and managing spending for taxpayers.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, chairwoman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, said Perry was a good pick.

“This is a critical time for the Department, and it needs steady leadership as we pursue the broad benefits of energy innovation and greater security for our nation’s energy infrastructure,” Murkowski said.

During a hearing before the committee, Perry apologized for calling for the elimination of DOE and vowed to protect the scientists and laboratories he will now oversee.

NUCLEAR WASTE STORAGE

At DOE, Perry will manage the nation's nuclear energy program and the ongoing problem of storing waste from reactors that generate spent nuclear fuel.

Under repeated questioning by Cortez Masto, Perry told the Senate hearing that he would not rule out using Yucca Mountain as a permanent site for storing nuclear waste.

Cortez Masto, a member of the committee, said she pressed Perry repeatedly, in a private meeting and at his confirmation hearing, on the issue of Yucca Mountain.

“While we do not see eye to eye on all issues, I believe Governor Perry understands the importance of this issue and is someone I can work with to ensure Yucca Mountain never sees the light of day,” Cortez Masto said.

U.S. Rep. Dina Titus, D-Nev., who has led efforts in the House to keep nuclear waste out of Nevada and Yucca Mountain, said Perry “waffled” when asked about the Nevada site during his hearing.

“Mr. Perry has no experience in these areas and presents a danger to the health and safety of Nevadans,” Titus said.

Perry served as a Texas governor for 15 years, during which time the state underwent an energy boom that included oil shale drilling and wind energy production.

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

While he refused to rule out Yucca Mountain as a site for permanent nuclear waste storage, he acknowledged the political opposition in Nevada. Still, he said, he would be bound to uphold the law.

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

PRESSURE IS BUILDING

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

Yucca Mountain is located about 90 miles north of Las Vegas, the most populous city in the state and a world destination for entertainment and gaming.

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.

Perry said he supported interim storage of nuclear waste in Texas and other states willing to store waste from nuclear power plants.

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 Senate hearing, 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 at the site.

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