

APRIL 5, 2017 11:29 AM

New Mexico, Texas seek licenses to store spent nuclear fuel

<http://www.thenewstribune.com/news/business/article142782649.html>

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.

BY SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN *Associated Press*

The race for what to do with spent fuel generated by the nation's nuclear power plants is heating up as backers of a plan to build a temporary storage site in New Mexico made the rounds in Washington, D.C., on Wednesday in hopes of gaining support for their proposal.

Holtec International and a coalition of local leaders from southeastern New Mexico first announced plans two years ago to construct a state-of-the-art, below-ground space for temporarily housing the tons of spent fuel that has been piling up at reactors around the U.S.

The company recently submitted its application for licensing to the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission, starting what will be a yearslong review process. It will take federal regulators 60 days to determine if the application is complete and then the more in-depth work will begin.

The agency is already reviewing an application from a West Texas company that treats and disposes of radioactive waste in a remote area not far from the New Mexico border. Waste Control Specialists has proposed storing some 5,000 metric tons of spent fuel.

Federal officials have long acknowledged that the future of nuclear energy in the U.S. depends on the ability to manage and dispose of used fuel and high-level radioactive waste.

The U.S. Energy Department in 2015 announced that it would begin identifying possible locations for interim storage sites as part of its plan to spur the use of nuclear power and develop the transportation and storage infrastructure needed to manage the waste.

Under the Trump administration, some members of Congress have shown renewed interest in the mothballed Yucca Mountain project in Nevada as a long-term solution. But the industry has said that temporary storage will have to be part of the equation since the licensing process for Yucca Mountain would take years.

Yucca Mountain was designed with a cap of 70,000 metric tons. The proposed facility in southeastern New Mexico would hold close to 120,000 metric tons in special canisters buried just below the surface in concrete and steel cavities designed to protect against floods, tornados and earthquakes.

Company officials planned to discuss their application during a news conference Wednesday afternoon in Washington.

Holtec supporters have said there's no better place for temporary storage since the desert region is already home to the federal government's only underground repository for low-level radioactive waste and a multibillion-dollar uranium enrichment plant.

Under the Obama administration, federal officials had said community consent for placing such facilities would be instrumental to their success. Holtec has the support of the surrounding communities, as well as Gov. Susana Martinez and other lawmakers.

Top elected leaders in Nevada have come out against the possibility of reviving Yucca Mountain. It was unclear how interest in that project would affect efforts by Waste Control Specialists and Holtec to develop temporary storage options.