

YUCCA MOUNTAIN: Unsafe site won't ever be safe for nuclear waste

By BRIAN SANDOVAL and RICHARD BRYAN SPECIAL TO THE REVIEW-JOURNAL April 12, 2015

Nevada Rep. Crescent Hardy, who joined a pro-Yucca Mountain congressional site visit this past week, recently asked the question, "Is there a scenario in which Nevadans would actually welcome nuclear waste storage at Yucca Mountain?" ("Time for Nevada to talk Yucca Mountain," March 22 Review-Journal).

The answer to that question is an emphatic "no" for one simple yet unavoidable reason: Because Yucca Mountain is an unsafe place for storing or disposing deadly nuclear waste and was selected for purely political reasons having nothing to do with science or suitability. There is nothing for state officials to negotiate. In fact, our leaders would be remiss in their duty to protect the public and the environment to entertain the notion that any amount of dollars could possibly compensate for likely grievous and lethal harm from siting a facility in such an unsafe location as Yucca Mountain.

From day one, science with respect to Yucca Mountain has taken a back seat to Washington, D.C., power politics.

In 1987, Congress ignored science completely and named Yucca Mountain as the only site to be studied as a potential repository in spite of its known serious flaws. Yucca was picked not because it was the best site or even a safe one. It was chosen solely because Nevada was the most politically vulnerable state at the time. Sites in Texas, Louisiana, Washington, and other states were dismissed out of hand because their states were protected by powerful Washington, D.C., politicians.

As site characterization at Yucca progressed, every time the science showed the site to be seriously flawed, the Energy Department merely invented another engineering fix — like the metal waste packages that will have to remain intact for 10,000 years or more, even though they've never been built or tested; more than 11,000 titanium drip shields that must be placed over the "corrosion-resistant" waste packages (DOE does not plan to install them for 100 years or more) in order to meet the radiation exposure criteria; and manipulating the site's boundaries so the aquifer below Yucca can be used to "dilute" the radiation that will inevitably escape from the repository.

And when even these "fixes" were not enough, the Energy Department simply abandoned its own siting criteria containing specific qualifying and disqualifying conditions (that Yucca couldn't meet) and created a black box-like assessment tool (called Total System Performance Assessment, or TSPA) that allows the site's many flaws to be camouflaged and rendered insignificant.

The way to fix the nuclear waste disposal problem is not to keep beating the dead horse that is Yucca Mountain, as Rep. John Shimkus, R-Ill., appeared to be doing with the promotional tour of the shut-down Yucca Mountain site last week. A more constructive and fruitful approach would be to move forward with new initiatives that rely on real science to identify safe and suitable storage and disposal sites and require states and local governments to give their consent to any future nuclear waste siting efforts.

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