

GOP proposes more money to revive frozen Yucca Mountain Project

By STEVE TETREAULT REVIEW-JOURNAL WASHINGTON BUREAU April 15, 2015 - 1:17pm

WASHINGTON — With Republicans now in charge on both sides of Capitol Hill, lawmakers who want [a new life for the Yucca Mountain Project](#) launched their latest bid on Wednesday to fund the Nevada nuclear waste site.

A GOP-controlled House subcommittee inserted \$200 million into an energy spending bill to move the Yucca program out of mothballs. The action was the first step in a prolonged appropriations process that will require further House votes, and also some in the Senate.

The spending, made part of a 2016 Energy Department budget bill, reflects “strong support for getting the [Yucca Mountain](#) license application finished up,” according to Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, chairman of the House energy and water subcommittee.

Since the Obama administration in 2010 halted the proposed nuclear waste repository 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas, Republican and Democratic supporters in the House have tried each year to restore funding, but have been turned down in the Senate by then-Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev.

This year the math is different.

Republicans hold majorities in both the House and Senate. New GOP leaders on the Senate Appropriations Committee including Sens. Thad Cochran of Mississippi and Lamar Alexander of Tennessee have been supportive of the nuclear waste site.

Reid, now the Senate minority leader but no less a foe of Yucca Mountain, remains influential in a body where a single senator can make or break legislation. Reid’s clout might be tested as well following his announcement last month that he plans to retire from the Senate when his term expires at the end of 2016.

While continuing to declare that “Yucca Mountain is dead,” Reid has not tipped his hand on how he will keep it that way.

Also, Nevada’s six-member delegation to Congress has shown a split on Yucca Mountain not evident in years past. Reid, Republican Sen. Dean Heller and Democratic Rep. Dina Titus oppose the project. Republican Reps. Cresent Hardy, Joe Heck and Mark Amodei have said Nevada should explore possible government benefits from hosting nuclear waste activities at the site if it can be done safely.

Hardy and Amodei were among a half dozen lawmakers who toured Yucca Mountain on April 9 that was organized to revive attention to the shut-down site.

Simpson declined to predict an outcome to this year’s fight over Yucca Mountain. He said he expected negotiations to take place later this year over the program, as well as other strategies to manage nuclear waste, and that House lawmakers will stand firm that Yucca be part of any final deal.

For instance, there is sentiment among key senators to establish a program that would consolidate at one or two interim locations the nuclear waste from 99 operating reactors and 17 decommissioned ones that still have waste stored onsite.

“I think interim storage needs to be done but not at the expense of Yucca Mountain,” which was envisioned as a permanent disposal site for highly radioactive waste, Simpson said. “We need both those programs. We are not going to put Yucca Mountain on the back burner to do interim storage.”

The bill launched Wednesday includes \$50 million for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to reopen the licensing process for the proposed repository. The money would serve as a down payment as NRC leaders have estimated it could cost \$330 million to reach a final decision on whether the site would be safe and suitable.

The Department of Energy, which conducted two decades of study before the Nevada site was put on the back burner, would be given \$150 million to take part in the licensing.

From that pot of money, \$5 million would be forwarded to “affected units of local government” that are not specified but believed to be Nye County, where the site is located.

Titus protested.

“The energy and water subcommittee demonstrated a lack of judgment in the drafting of this bad bill, and doubled down by moving it to the full committee with hundreds of millions of dollars more for the boondoggle of a project known as Yucca Mountain,” she said.

Some previous bills had included money for Nevada counties to monitor work at the Yucca site. Titus described the \$5 million local funding in the new bill as “hush-money to try and buy off Nevada communities to support this dangerous endeavor.

“Any members in our delegation who are open to even entertaining the idea of this dangerous project should be ashamed,” Titus added.

“It’s unfortunate but not unexpected that House Republicans want to keep throwing away taxpayer money on a project that will never be built,” said Kristen Orthman, a Reid spokeswoman.

Heller spokesman Neal Patel said, “Appropriating funds toward Yucca Mountain is a waste of taxpayers’ dollars.”

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