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Nevada lawmakers line up to testify against reviving Yucca Mountain

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WASHINGTON — Nevada lawmakers will testify before a House hearing this week in opposition of revising Yucca Mountain as a permanent nuclear waste site, the Energy and Commerce Committee announced Monday.

In advance of the hearing, Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval sent a letter to the committee noting the state's opposition based on "scientific, technical and legal merits."

"Furthermore, as a reminder to your committee members, as set forth in the Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982, only the governor is empowered to consult on matters related to the siting of a nuclear waste repository," Sandoval wrote.

Nevada's two U.S. Sens., Dean Heller, a Republican, and Catherine Cortez Masto, a Democrat, and the state's three congressional members from Las Vegas, also oppose restarting development at Yucca Mountain.

But the state's efforts to block congressional attempts to develop the mothballed facility could face steep political hurdles.

Lawmakers from states with power plants are seeking a federal solution to permanent storage of waste, following an Obama administration decision in 2012 to defund Yucca Mountain and halt development.

The subcommittee on environment will explore the issues of permanent and interim storage in the Wednesday hearing as the panel prepares to write legislation addressing the storage problem.

“Once again, forces outside of Nevada are just trying to pawn off their problems by dumping nuclear waste in our backyard,” said Rep. Ruben Kihuen, D-Nev., whose congressional district includes the Nye County site.

Kihuen said it is “exceedingly unfair that Nevada is asked to serve as the dumping ground for the rest of the country’s waste.”

Also appearing before the committee will be Rep. Dina Titus, D-Nev., Rep. Jacky Rosen, D-Nev., and Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C., who filed a bill this year that would force the government to restart development of Yucca Mountain.

Although Yucca Mountain was designated by Congress in 1987 as a permanent repository, President Barack Obama defunded the project in 2012 at the urging of then-Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev.

But the last time the House voted on Yucca Mountain in 2014, on an amendment by Titus that would have removed funding for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to finish the licensing application on Yucca Mountain, it amounted to a major defeat for Nevada.

The House voted 75-344 against the Titus amendment, including 64 percent of Democrats who voted.

The subcommittee hearing this week includes draft legislative proposals that call for continuing the licensing process for the Nevada site.

President Donald Trump has proposed \$120 million in his budget blueprint for fiscal year 2018, which begins Oct. 1, to revive Yucca Mountain and find interim sites for nuclear waste until it can be stored permanently.

Energy Secretary Rick Perry visited the Yucca Mountain site last month, and met with Sandoval afterward. Perry praised the state’s historical contributions to nuclear energy and national security.

Sandoval, in his letter to the committee, said those contributions include 928 nuclear tests — 100 of which were conducted above ground.

As a result, the federal government paid \$1.9 billion over 25 years “to innocent people in Nevada and individuals from neighboring states who were exposed to dangerous and deadly levels of radioactive material.”

Sandoval also noted the state is home to two Air Force bases, an Army depot and a test and training range, “a total federal land withdrawal of roughly the size of the state of Connecticut.”

Meanwhile, the need to store the 77,000 tons of nuclear waste is prompting lawmakers from more than 30 states with power plants to seek immediate solutions.

The subcommittee, under Chairman John Shimkus, R-Ill., will consider draft legislation resulting from multiple hearings held last year on the federal government's obligation to dispose of nuclear waste.

"Now is the time to get our nation's nuclear waste management policy back," Shimkus said in a statement.

Two private interim storage facilities in New Mexico and Texas have submitted applications with the NRC to receive licenses to store nuclear wastes.

The president's budget for the Department of Energy, and the subcommittee, include interim storage in their proposals because the licensing process for Yucca Mountain is expected to take years.

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