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Nevada: Basin and Range reversal won't bolster Yucca Mountain

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Nye County officials welcomed the possibility of the reversal of the Basin and Range National Monument status after President Trump rolled out his executive order.

Trump last week directed U.S. Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke to review 24 national monuments, including the Basin and Range National Monument in remote Nye and Lincoln counties that was designated by former President Barack Obama in July 2015.

Upon designation, the 704,000-acre monument threw another obstacle into the Yucca Mountain project, as it partially blocked the U.S. Department of Energy's proposed east-west Caliente rail route that would be used for nuclear waste shipments.

Darrell Lacy, director of the Nye County Nuclear Waste Project Office, said the county prefers the Mina route that runs north-south as it would be "cheaper to build and provide better opportunities for economic development."

"Our preferred route is similar to the Mina route using part of the old Tonopah and Tidewater plus the Tonopah and Goldfield rail routes but with a few changes," Lacy said.

That route would connect to the existing rail lines near Hawthorne go through Tonopah south to Yucca Mountain, then south through the Pahrump and Sandy Valley area to a connection near Primm, Lacy said.

“One advantage of this route is it totally avoids Las Vegas,” Lacy said. “The state of Nevada and Las Vegas are concerned about the potential impacts on tourism from transportation, we hope they will support our proposed route since it addresses one of their main concerns.” It also would provide a tremendous boost to economic development with a commercial rail connection from Southern Nevada to the Reno area near the Tahoe Reno industrial park, Lacy said.

“If the state would help, we could get a lot of benefits for the citizens of Nye County and Nevada,” he said.

State of Nevada reacts

Bob Halstead, executive director of the Nevada Agency for Nuclear Projects, said the proposed Mina corridor has several land conflicts, including the Walker River Paiute Indian Reservation, a possible conflict with the U.S. Department of Defense because of transportation of munitions in and out of Hawthorne Army Depot and flights out of Fallon Naval Air Station.

In addition, a variety of endangered species, Native American and historical sites also present a challenge to the construction of the proposed corridor.

“There’s no easy way to build a rail route to Yucca Mountain,” Halstead said.

Additionally, carrying the high-level nuclear waste through Primm “doesn’t protect Las Vegas one iota,” he said.

The DOE’s current license application for Yucca Mountain is premised on the Caliente corridor, a 300-mile rail line that would connect a rail line near Caliente with a proposed geologic repository at Yucca Mountain. The DOE’s preferred route has been studied in much greater detail than Mina rail line.

If DOE wants to switch the Mina route, it would have to switch a license application to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, get a certificate of

public convenience and necessity and greatly revise their Environmental Impact Statement, Halstead said.

Aside from that, Halstead said that even if the Basin and Range National Monument's area is reduced significantly, it wouldn't necessarily allow for the construction of the Caliente rail route because of its location. "We shouldn't assume that the secretary's review is going to single out the monument for any major change," Halstead said.

The state of Nevada has long criticized the DOE's Caliente proposal, arguing that it failed to evaluate expected impacts on specific parcels and current users of land, specific land use conflicts, or necessary land exchanges.

Halstead, however, said that he isn't convinced that Mina is the best route.

"In some ways, the Basin and Range Monument designation is ironically the best thing that could have happened for Nye County because it will make the DOE give up a truly unwise, impossible choice for rail access and that will give Nye County and other people who want to see Yucca Mountain go forward a chance to correct DOE's mistake," Halstead said. "It remains to be seen whether they will be able to do that and if Mina is the right solution."

A closer look

The land at the Basin and Range National Monument is currently preserved under the Antiquities Act of 1906. The measure gives the president the authority to designate public lands as national monuments without congressional approval. Such designations protect areas from mining, grazing and oil production.

Former U.S. Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., was one of the biggest advocates for protecting the area. Before Obama's executive action took place, Reid introduced the Garden Valley Withdrawal Act, which would preserve the land around Michael Heizer's artwork "The City" and protect over 800,000 of acres of federal land around it from development.

Reid's conservation efforts found little support in Nye County. "I find the Basin Range Monument an excellent example of hypocrisy," said Lorinda Wichman, Nye County commissioner. "It was our former senior senator that insisted we must have a consent-based location for the nation's spent nuclear fuel and it was our former senior senator that gifted us with a monster of a monument without consent.

"A noble concept used only as a self-serving ploy loses all nobility in the aftermath," she added.

Aside from Nye County, Trump's announcement received a cold welcome from several members of the Nevada congressional delegation.

U.S. Rep. Ruben Kihuen, D-North Las Vegas, whose district includes the monument, said that he is "deeply disappointed" that Trump has ordered a review of these monuments, "that could potentially lead to a loss of status and funding."

"By threatening national monument designations that stretch back more than two decades, President Trump is making one thing clear today - he doesn't give a damn about Nevadans," Kihuen said.

U.S. Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev., said Trump's "unprecedented" executive order threatens decades' worth of conservation efforts. "The Trump administration fails to acknowledge how vital national monuments and public lands are to our economy," she said. "Nevada's outdoor recreation economy is critical to the state's economic growth, giving a much-needed boost to our rural communities."

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