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## Shame on Nevada leaders who sell out on Yucca Mountain

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Some politicians in Congress are grasping at the fantasy of gaining control of Yucca Mountain so their states' expended-but-still-lethally radioactive nuclear power plant fuel rods can be dumped in Nevada.

Their strategy, which will be aired during a congressional hearing Thursday on Capitol Hill, is to persuade Nevada politicians to betray their constituents and allow the use of Yucca Mountain's frail geology as a tomb for the most deadly material known to man. This, in exchange for a bag of gold coins. More specifically, they are once again floating the notion that if Nevada politicians green-light the use of Yucca Mountain as a nuclear waste repository — something we have fought for 30 years — they'll give us something in return: a north-south interstate highway, perhaps, or research money for UNLV.

Offering political payola to get Nevada to take it in the gut is despicable, and shame on any public officials from Nevada who would be seduced by such a conniving tactic. At stake is nothing less than the safety and welfare of the people who elected the Nevada officials to office, and the economic security of Las Vegas, which depends on visitors feeling relaxed, comfortable and safe, versus looking over their shoulders at a nuclear waste dump 90 miles up the highway.

In terms of geology, chemistry and physics, Yucca Mountain is not a trustworthy encasement. Sure, the nuclear power industry will cite study after study suggesting the safety of such a venture, and Nevada can point to study after study that sounds alarms. Among the immediate concerns for us, our children and our grandchildren is

whether this waste can be safely transported along railways and highways, past millions of people and through Las Vegas, without fear of accident or terrorist attack. And if it were to get here, can canisters be constructed that will absolutely maintain their integrity over the course of millennia against the moisture of the mountain's interior so radiation doesn't seep into the groundwater and spread beyond the mountain?

Bottom line: Why should Nevada be anointed as the eternal caretaker for nuclear waste that is generated in other states? It's not like we haven't already done our civic duty by hosting atmospheric and underground nuclear bomb testing at the Nevada Test Site. There is a reason, you see, that the 1987 legislation in Congress that assigned Nevada the destiny of being a radioactive garbage dump was called the "screw Nevada bill."

Through the devoted work of the state's political leadership over the years, especially that of former governor and senator Richard Bryan and sustained by the chokehold maneuvers of retiring U.S. Sen. Harry Reid to starve the project of funding, Yucca Mountain effectively has been closed to the nuclear industry.

Use of Yucca Mountain is for all intents and purposes off the table. The Energy Department withdrew its application to use the mountain; when the Nuclear Regulatory Commission complained, a federal appellate court ordered that the licensing procedure play out until the money ran out. The NRC blew through most of its final \$12 million on more hearings, and what's left is now needed to store the 2.3 million documents that have been generated in the prolonged and misguided efforts to justify the use of the nondescript mountain, and to design a searchable database in case anyone needs to refer to them in the future.

If a Republican-controlled Congress and White House were to try to revive Yucca Mountain, the approval process would only then finally face its toughest test yet: adjudicating nearly 300 contentious issues, each one of them essentially requiring civil court-type proceedings with depositions, examinations and cross-examinations. Never mind that the federal government hasn't yet acquired the water and land rights necessary to exploit the mountain for its purposes.

Meanwhile, there is interest elsewhere in the country, including in Texas, for private companies to host nuclear waste repositories, and those possibilities need to be explored. The radioactive pellets, encased in ceramic, also can be safely kept for more than 120 years in steel-lined, water-filled concrete pools or in reinforced concrete containers alongside the nuclear power plants that created them, the NRC says. Over that period of time, science might well develop an efficient way of reprocessing the material.

And so the House Energy and Commerce Committee's subcommittee on the environment and economy will meet Thursday to try to soften Nevadans on taking stuff that no other state has yet volunteered to take. "The federal government must fulfill its legal obligation and resume work on the Yucca Mountain license application as soon as possible," the subcommittee chairman, John Shimkus (R-Ill.), said. Yes, there is a sense of selfish urgency in his voice; his own state has 10,000 metric tons of nuclear waste with which it doesn't know what to do. At the hearing, Shimkus said, Nevada stakeholders and the various levels of government can discuss the economic benefits of storing the old fuel rods at Yucca Mountain.

Any Nevada politician who engages in that conversation — even with as little as a coy wink — would be betting on the future physical and economic health of Nevada. We have not elected our representatives to gamble on our future. That has been the position of most Democrats and Republicans representing Nevada, as keeping the nuclear industry's paws off Yucca Mountain has been a bipartisan effort. Anyone who strays from that commitment will no longer be trustworthy as someone who stands for, and with, Nevada.

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