

US's Yucca Mountain nuclear project in meltdown

If James Bond villain Ernst Blofeld is looking for a new secret base, some interesting real estate may be about to come on the market.

By Garry White

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In the Nevada Desert, the US Federal government has spent the last 22 years hollowing out the inside of a mountain – but the whole project has been a complete waste of time. In a staggeringly expensive about turn, the Yucca Mountain project is about to be canned.

Yucca Mountain was meant to solve one of the country's main energy problems, but one of the most powerful men in the country appears to have put a stop to it – just one year before the site was due to open. His name is Senator Harry Reid.



The Yucca Mountain repository was expected to hold 77,000 tonnes of nuclear waste safely away from danger Photo: AP

Yucca Mountain was – and technically still is – the US's official repository for spent nuclear fuel rods. A series of tunnels 1,000 feet below the mountain surface has been carefully bored. The project, which was expected to cost \$96bn (£58bn) over its lifetime, is situated in the most extensively studied piece of geology anywhere on the planet. It is also extremely controversial.

As nuclear power enjoys a renaissance all over the world, the problem of what to do with spent nuclear material is once again high on the agenda. The Yucca Mountain repository was expected to hold 77,000 tonnes of nuclear waste safely away from danger.

Located in a desert, the water table is deep and the area is sparsely populated. The mountain is also within the boundaries of the Nevada Test Site, where about 800 nuclear explosions have already taken place – including more than 20 tests by the British.

The location appears ideal. In fact, given the area's past and the level of nuclear material already discharged in the area, some nuclear industry insiders have been surprised at the strength of the opposition.

Despite this, the new Obama administration is going to pull the plug. In effect, it already has.

"Yucca Mountain is dead on arrival," Jim Riccio, a spokesman for Greenpeace in Washington, told *The Sunday*

Telegraph. "It's DOA."

The most vocal opponent of the project is now one of the most powerful men in America. Harry Reid, the senior Democratic Senator for Nevada is now the US Senate Majority Leader. He believes that his 22-year battle to scrap the Yucca Mountain project is finally at an end.

"I am proud that after over two decades of fighting the proposed Yucca Mountain nuclear waste dump, the project is finally being terminated," Senator Reid recently said.

In his 2010 budget, President Obama delivered the lowest funding level yet for the project, which eliminates all work on the design, construction and transportation infrastructure for the dump.

However, despite Senator Reid's strong statements that the Yucca Mountain project has ended, the law establishing the site as the US's nuclear waste repository remains on the statute books. Some in Nevada do not believe the battle is over.

"It is not dead yet," Deputy Attorney General Marta Adams said. The State officials argue that the licensing application had not been withdrawn by the Department of Energy or denied by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. They believe Yucca Mountain could still go ahead – and on August 12 the state approved a further \$10m in legal fees to continue to fight the battle.

However, it really does appear that Yucca Mountain will not now open. This leaves the US without a long-term solution for disposing of nuclear waste. Waste from old nuclear plants already exists – and it has to go somewhere. Sources close to the nuclear industry told *The Sunday Telegraph* that if Yucca is scrapped, then the US Department of Energy already has a little-known working waste repository in New Mexico.

With nuclear new build gathering pace, disposal of nuclear waste is now a global issue. Finland is building its own repository with widespread public approval, while Canada is getting to grips with the same problem.

In the UK, we should find out next summer what the UK's disposal plan is, but industry insiders widely expect that a repository will be built at Sellafield.

Whatever happens, the UK government need to look at what has happened in Nevada – and manage the process a lot more sensitively than the Department of Energy did. If new build is going to happen – and it looks like it is – a UK repository is not just likely, it is essential.

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