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Yucca Mountain Funding Nears Its Demise

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WASHINGTON -- House and Senate Democrats are well on their way to helping the Obama administration kill Nevada's Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository (see [GSN](#), July 30).

Both chambers have approved fiscal 2010 Energy and Water Appropriations bills that match the administration's \$197 million request to let the Energy Department officially keep the project open on paper for a year while funding Energy Secretary Steven Chu's blue ribbon panel to develop an alternative plan for storing and managing nuclear waste.

The current 77,000 tons of high-level nuclear waste are held in temporary surface storage facilities at 131 sites in 39 states.

One difference between the two bills is that the House matches the administration's request of \$56 million to also keep alive for one more year a Nuclear Regulatory Commission review of a Bush Energy Department application to build the long-stalled repository, primarily to avoid a legal challenge.

The Senate bill only asks for \$29 million. There is no time line for conference negotiations, although a Senate aide said conference talks should be smooth enough for a bill to get finished before the next fiscal year starts Oct. 1.

Since the start, the repository has met stiff resistance, especially from Nevadans, particularly Senate Majority Leader Reid (D-Nev.).

Reid recently said President Barack Obama reaffirmed his plan to kill the program by zeroing out funding in FY11 for the NRC review of the repository's application.

The Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee approved the creation of a National Commission on Nuclear Waste in its broad energy bill to perform a two-year study on the best way for the United States to move forward on a permanent nuclear waste repository.

Energy and Natural Resources Committee Republicans said that simply delays a permanent solution to the problem and unsuccessfully tried to add language to the bill giving the Energy secretary the authority to enter into cost-sharing agreements with private companies and contracts with local governments for hosting nuclear waste storage facilities.

Panel Democrats expressed concern that local governments could enter into agreements without consulting a state government.

The panel turned down an attempt by Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) to express support for making Yucca Mountain a permanent nuclear waste repository.

Energy and Natural Resources Chairman Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.) said he supported this idea, but the "administration has made it clear" that it will not move forward on Yucca Mountain.