

Officials frustrated over lack of progress on Yucca Mountain

By Gary Martin Review-Journal Washington Bureau
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WASHINGTON — Energy industry officials and lawmakers vented their frustration over the federal government’s failure to open Yucca Mountain as a permanent storage site for the nation’s high-level nuclear waste at a House hearing on Tuesday.

Officials and experts on nuclear waste management said radioactive waste continues to pile up at power plants and in local communities because the Energy Department has failed to develop adequate storage.

“To put it bluntly, the citizens of states and localities have the federal government’s waste and the federal government has our money,” said Anthony O’Donnell with the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners, referring to a nuclear waste fund paid by ratepayers that was created to build a repository.

Many of the energy industry officials urged the development of interim storage sites as the political battle to license and develop Nevada’s Yucca Mountain continues to play out in Congress.

“For years, Yucca Mountain has been a political lightning rod in ways that have made it exceptionally difficult — at times, impossible — to move forward with that site,” said David Victor, chairman of the San Onofre Community Engagement Panel in California, who was among those urging Congress to explore alternatives.

[Opponents of the plan](#), who have so far successfully delayed the licensing process to develop the site for storage, also urged lawmakers to look elsewhere.

Dr. Edwin Lyman with the Union of Concerned Scientists said it is possible that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission may ultimately reject an Energy Department application to open Yucca Mountain, meaning the department should be searching for other potential repository sites. He also said local consent should be sought on nuclear waste projects, noting that New Mexico is interested providing interim storage.

'If you can't do it there ... '

But O'Donnell, with the utility commissioners association, told the panel that seeking alternative sites would decrease the incentive for the federal government to push forward to open Yucca Mountain, which he described as the perfect geological location for storage of nuclear waste.

"If you can't do it there, you are going to have a hard time doing it anywhere," O'Donnell said.

President Donald Trump has included \$120 million in his budget for fiscal 2018 to restart the licensing process for Yucca Mountain, designated in 1987 by Congress as the permanent repository for nuclear waste produced at power plants. The Energy Department submitted its license application to the NRC in 2008, but withdrew it during the Obama administration in 2010 and defunded licensing operations.

A House energy bill also included funding for the Energy Department licensing and for the NRC to prepare for the process. But the Senate is pursuing a waste management plan that would look at interim storage sites until a permanent geologic repository is constructed. The two bills will have to be reconciled in conference at the end of the budget process.

"We have to find a way to move past the gridlock," said Rep. Blake Farenthold, R-Texas, chairman of the House Oversight subcommittee on interior, energy and environment, which held Tuesday's hearing.

Farenthold's congressional district includes the South Texas Nuclear Generating Station, which stores nuclear waste and was in the path of Hurricane Harvey. He said he "would like to find a long-term solution."

Moving the waste once, to a permanent site, is preferable to moving it twice, he said. But moving it twice was better than leaving nuclear waste stored in dry casks at power plants.

But Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., said he found it "troubling that the Trump administration is moving swiftly to advance the Yucca Mountain facility."

Raskin cited concerns with volcanic and seismic activity in Nevada, as well as the potential of groundwater contamination from nuclear waste storage within the Nye County ridge.

"There are significant reasons why the repository at Yucca Mountain, a site originally selected over 30 years ago, has not been built," Raskin said.

Meanwhile, nuclear power reactors produce 2,000 tons of nuclear waste every year to produce 20 percent of the electricity used in the United States, said Katie Tubb with the Heritage Foundation.

Tubb said “politics” has been the biggest stumbling block to licensing Yucca Mountain, noting that the licensing process was stopped under President Barack Obama because of opposition by then-Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev.

But she also noted that the state of Nevada has significant challenges to the license that must be addressed if the process is continued.

Las Vegas Chamber chimes in

Las Vegas business leaders are in Washington this week and will meet with lawmakers about the Yucca Mountain project.

The Las Vegas Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce opposes the project, said Cara Clarke, a chamber spokeswoman. In addition to concerns about storage, Clarke said the chamber questions the safety of transporting the waste, which would have to travel through 44 states and the District of Columbia.

Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev., in testimony submitted to the subcommittee, urged House lawmakers to move “past failed proposals of the past and look to solutions of the future.”

The hearing showed that Republicans on the panel “were unaware of the environmental and geologic concerns at the site,” said Rep. Dina Titus, D-Nev., who has sponsored a bill that would seek consent-based solutions to nuclear storage.

Heller and Sen. Catherine Cortez-Masto, D-Nev., have filed similar legislation in the Senate.

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Growing piles of nuclear waste

— Over the last four decades, the nuclear industry has produced 76,430 metric tons of nuclear waste – enough to cover a football field 8 yards deep.

— In 1982, Congress passed the Nuclear Waste Policy Act (NWPA), which directs the Department of Energy to build and operate a repository for used nuclear fuels and other high-level radioactive waste.\

— In 1987, Congress amendment the NWPA, designating Yucca Mountain as the national site for storage, pending a license by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

— Despite the NWPA, the United States does not utilize one repository or storage site, leaving nuclear waste sitting at numerous nuclear facilities throughout communities nationwide.

Source: House Oversight subcommittee on interior, energy and environment.