

Energy chief: Bid to revive Nevada nuclear waste dump doomed

Matthew Daly/Associated Press

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WASHINGTON — Any effort to revive the long-dormant nuclear waste dump at Nevada's Yucca Mountain is doomed to fail because the project lacks support from elected officials in the state, Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz said Wednesday.

A 30-year fight over where to store the country's nuclear waste has convinced him that "a consent-based approach is the only way we're going to get across the finish line," Moniz said.

A 1980s law that directs Congress to store waste at the planned site 100 miles from Las Vegas "hasn't worked" and can't work, Moniz said in a speech at the National Press Club, one of his final public appearances as energy chief.

"You're not going to get there unless it's a consent-based approach," Moniz said. "You have to have local, state and federal people lined up" in favor of the project for it to succeed.

President Barack Obama dropped the Yucca plan early in his tenure under intense pressure from Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid of Nevada, who made opposition to Yucca Mountain a central part of his political identity. Reid's successor in the Senate, Democrat Catherine Cortez Masto, also opposes Yucca, as do Republican Sen. Dean Heller and Republican Gov. Brian Sandoval.

President-elect Donald Trump has not indicated a clear position on the project, but he pledged to study the issue at a campaign appearance near Las Vegas in October. Trump owns a luxury hotel in Las Vegas. His nominee for energy secretary, former Texas Gov. Rick Perry, supports nuclear power but has not clarified his stance on Yucca Mountain.

Trump's transition team includes several project supporters, and the team has asked the Energy Department whether there are any legal barriers to moving ahead with the project.

A questionnaire submitted to DOE employees last month asks whether there are any "statutory restrictions" to restarting the project and whether the department has a plan for resuming the proceedings to secure the needed licenses. The Obama administration cut off federal funding in 2010, effectively mothballing the project.

The nation has no long-term plan to find a permanent home for more than 70,000 metric tons of radioactive waste being stored at nuclear power plants around the country.

Moniz said the Energy Department is working with states and communities that may want to host projects for waste storage or disposal, but no comprehensive plan has been developed. States including New Mexico and Texas have indicated interest in hosting an interim storage site for the country's high-level nuclear waste.

Five of Nevada's six-member congressional delegation have co-sponsored measures in the House and Senate that would require the Energy Department to get written consent from a state's governor, local governments and Indian tribes before a nuclear waste dump could be built.

