

Trump's budget chief says funding for Yucca Mountain was his idea

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WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump's top budget man, Mick Mulvaney, solved a mystery Tuesday. Asked who put \$120 million into Trump's spending plan to restart licensing for a Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository and other interim storage, Mulvaney said he did.

"Whose idea was to put it in there?" the Office of Management and Budget director replied. "I wrote the budget and I am very interested in seeing that issue explored further. We have to put this stuff someplace. So the \$120 million you saw, it was actually very minor. I'm surprised it got that much attention as it did. It's only to explore the possibility of licensing."

As a rule, Trump's positions on issues have been aired out in the open, often exhaustively — during 2016 campaign appearances or on Twitter. Yucca Mountain is the exception.

As the GOP presidential nominee stumping in Las Vegas in October 2016, Trump was asked where he stood on the controversial project located some 90 miles northwest of the city.

"I'm very friendly with this area," Trump responded. "I have a hotel here. I will tell you I'm going to take a look at it because so many people here are talking about it. I'll take a look at it, and the next time you interview me, I'll have an answer."

Then Trump failed to produce an answer before Nevadans went to the polls.

Even after he took the oath of office, Trump's position on Yucca was played close to the vest.

The Trump administration slated \$120 million for Yucca and interim nuclear waste storage in its "skinny" budget in March. Thereafter the Trump team played a double game on the project, by releasing statements like this one from an unknown senior administration official.

"We've been reviewing Yucca Mountain very closely and before any final licensing decision is made, we'll be consulting with all relevant stakeholders to ensure the safety of the American people. Ultimately, it will be a recommendation from the Department of Energy."

Washington had spent \$12 billion on the Yucca project before President Barack Obama pulled the plug on it in a move widely seen as a favor to then-Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. The son of Searchlight proved to be the most formidable opponent to the project.

Today the state's three top lawmakers — GOP Gov. Brian Sandoval, GOP Sen. Dean Heller and Democratic Sen. Catherine Cortez-Masto — oppose the project.

Be it noted, local opposition normally is no hurdle for Trump.

Since Trump hadn't taken a stand on Yucca in 2016, the repository appeared dead.

Then in March, the Trump White House released its "skinny" budget, or spending framework. The "skinny" budget cut Department of Energy spending by 5.8 percent, even as it added \$120 million for Yucca and other interim nuclear waste storage.

Did Mulvaney discuss Yucca Mountain with Trump before putting the \$120 million in the OMB spending plan?

"I don't remember if we talked to the president about it, if that rose to the level," the OMB chief responded. "I know that we talked to (Energy) Secretary (Rick) Perry."

Mulvaney has a history with nuclear waste. As a member of the House from South Carolina, Mulvaney represented a district with nuclear power plants in two counties. In 2016 he introduced legislation that he told The State newspaper would fund interim nuclear waste storage "until Yucca can open."

Mulvaney also argued that the GOP tax cut plan, regulation roll-backs and energy plan (which includes Yucca Mountain) sets "a pathway to sustained 3-percent growth." The Trump team calls it "Maganomics" — a play on the campaign hashtag MAGA, or Make America Great Again.

An OMB official explained, "This program enhances national security and reduces financial burden on the taxpayer by enabling near-term consolidation of nuclear waste and safely storing it while a repository is completed."

But what about Nevada in 2020 — the state Hillary Clinton won after opposing Yucca?

UNLV political science professor John Tuman said that if Trump runs in 2020, "he has paths to re-election that don't involve Nevada."

If there is a political consideration for Trump, Tuman said, it could be a consideration of how the issue could affect Heller, whose vote could be key in passing the Trump agenda.

Dan Schinhofen, chairman of Nye County Commission, which supports the Yucca Mountain project, acknowledged that he usually knows why Trump has taken a position because the president lays bare his thinking on Twitter.

Yucca Mountain is the rare controversy where Trump has been reluctant to proclaim his opinion.

Still, Schinhofen said, "I don't see the mystery here. The guy he's appointed to the Department of Energy (Perry) has moved forward."

Schinhofen added that he talked to Trump sons Donald Jr. and Eric during the 2016 campaign. Perhaps the sons helped inform the father's opinion. "I spoke to his kids. I talked to the Department of Energy staff," said the Nye County pol. "It's no secret."

He has a point. After all, the \$120 million is in the budget.

Contact Debra J. Saunders at dsaunders@reviewjournal.com or 202-662-7391. Follow @DebraJSaunders on Twitter.