

The return of Yucca Mountain?

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Remember that time the federal government passed a law saying Nevada's Yucca Mountain should be the only place to bury the nation's high-level nuclear waste?

Yeah, about that.

U.S. Sen. Harry Reid did his level best to fight the nuclear waste repository during his long career in Congress, stripping funds from its budget and promoting the idea of on-site storage at nuclear plants in dry casks.

Reid repeatedly insisted that Yucca Mountain was closed, dead and forever destined to remain a monument to political folly, an \$8 billion hole in the ground.

"It's gone," Reid said of the Yucca project in his farewell speech to the Senate on Thursday. "Someone asked me the other day, you know, the Republicans are in power now. They're going to come back to Yucca Mountain. I said, well, they'd better bring a checkbook with them. Because there's nothing there now. ... There's nothing there. You could probably get it going again now for \$10 billion to \$12 billion. So if you have a way to pay for it, good luck."

It seems somebody thinks there's a way to pay for it, however.

According to a story in the trade publication E&E News on Friday, a draft list of questions directed to Department of Energy officials indicates the Yucca Mountain project is not dead, at least in the minds of the incoming Trump administration. A copy of the survey obtained by E&E News — which two sources confirmed was authentic — lists questions including these: "Are there statutory restrictions to restarting the Yucca Mountain

project?" and, "Does [the Energy Department] have a plan to resume the Yucca Mountain license proceedings?"

Um, yeah, about that program being dead ...

Not only are there no statutory restrictions to reviving Yucca Mountain, quite the opposite: Yucca is actually the law of the land, and has been since 1986, when the so-called "Screw Nevada" bill passed Congress and was signed by then-President Ronald Reagan, designating the ridge as the nation's only nuclear waste repository. Since then, Yucca has been defunded and ignored by the Obama administration, which sought instead to implement a "consent-based" process for finding a place to bury nuclear waste.

But the original law was never changed.

The reason Reid never led an effort to re-write the law is the same reason Nevada was targeted for the repository in the first place: It's a small state with a small congressional delegation, and there are a lot more members of Congress from states that are home to nuclear reactors who want the waste that's been piling up there to go somewhere else, including California, Washington, Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York and Virginia.

That hasn't changed since the debate began.

Reid has repeatedly dismissed concerns that the project could be revived by a Republican president with Republican majorities in Congress to back him up (although there are plenty of Democrats from nuclear-rich states who would join an effort to ship their waste to the Nevada desert). And so long as Reid was in office, he used his power to stall, delay and otherwise obstruct the project (getting a former staffer appointed to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission was one such maneuver, until the group fell victim to bitter infighting traced to Reid's appointee, who eventually resigned).

But Reid and Obama will be gone soon, and with them, the power that held Nevada harmless over all these years.

If the new Trump administration so desires, Yucca Mountain could make a comeback. And it appears that administration is at least considering the possibility.

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