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## Congressmen get up-close look at controversial Yucca dumpsite



AP Photo/John Locher

Rep. John Shimkus, R-Ill., stands near the north portal of Yucca Mountain during a congressional tour Thursday, April 9, 2015, near Mercury. Several members of congress toured the proposed radioactive waste dump 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

By Conor Shine

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[Yucca Mountain tour](#)



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Six congressmen, including two from Nevada, made the long trek 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas today to visit Yucca Mountain for a fact-finding trip, in the process stirring up a political controversy that had been largely dormant since the site was mothballed in 2009. The delegation tried to downplay the angst that surrounded their trip to the proposed repository for the nation's nuclear waste, framing the excursion as an educational trip for

several new members of a House of Representatives Energy and Commerce subcommittee. "I've got three new members here who haven't seen the site," said Rep. John Shimkus, R-Ill., who heads the subcommittee on environment and the economy. "Yucca Mountain is in a very isolated, safe place. It's next door to the nuclear test site. It's a long way from Las Vegas and it is a pretty good location to move forward on long-term geological repository." But that didn't stop several members of Nevada's federal delegation who weren't on the trip from blasting it as a politically motivated stunt.

"The committee engineered this visit from the very beginning to serve one distinct, self-serving purpose: that of becoming a disingenuous, political sideshow," U.S. Sen. Dean Heller said in a statement.

Rep. Dina Titus piled on, saying in a statement that "this taxpayer-funded junket does not move the conversation on long-term nuclear waste storage any closer to a solution."

"Nevada, which does not have a single nuclear waste plant, didn't create this problem, and should not be forced to be the nation's dumping ground," she added.

The six-member congressional delegation — which in addition to Shimkus included Nevada Reps. Crescent Hardy and Mark Amodei, Rep. Bob Latta, R-Ohio, Rep. Dan Newhouse, R-Wash., and Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Calif. — spent several hours at Yucca Mountain Thursday learning about the work already done at the site and the geologic factors that led to it being designated as the country's sole nuclear waste repository. Not included on the tour were any experts representing Nevada, which state officials pushed to send along before being rebuffed. Shimkus said the state's request came too late in the planning process, pointing out that local officials from Nye County were also excluded from the trip.

The tour included a ride through the five-mile exploratory tunnel carved into the heart of the mountain that has been used over the years for a variety of hydrological and geological tests in preparation for the site's licensing process.

So far, \$15 billion has been spent researching and preparing Yucca Mountain to receive the nation's high-level nuclear waste. As much as \$85 billion or more would be needed to complete the site before it could start receiving tens of thousands of tons of spent radioactive fuel, which is currently sitting in temporary storage at nuclear reactors around the country.

In the 1980s, initial plans called for two nuclear repositories, one in the eastern United States and another in the west. But that quickly was changed to focus only on Western states, with Washington, Texas and Nevada as the leading candidates for study.

The Yucca Mountain site was designated as the sole national nuclear repository in 1987 as part of the Nuclear Waste Policy Amendments Act, also known as the "Screw Nevada Bill" in what many saw as a triumph of politics over science.

Since then, Nevada officials, led by U.S. Sen. Harry Reid, have fiercely opposed the project and fought to block it at every turn. With help from President Barack Obama, Reid was successful in defunding and stalling work at Yucca Mountain, leading to a stalemate that has persisted ever since.

The national dialogue has subsequently moved toward a consent-based model that would encourage states willing to host a nuclear repository to volunteer for the role.

But with Reid retiring and Obama leaving the White House in 2016, there's a sense that the political winds surrounding the project are shifting.

"There are 34 states with nuclear wastes issues, five additional ones with defense waste issues. The Senate has not had a chance to vote on nuclear waste issues in over six years, so let's see what the will of the Senate is," Shimkus said, adding there's a supermajority in the House of Representatives that would likely support moving forward at Yucca Mountain. "I think that the debate's turning a little bit in (Nevada)."

Part of that shift can be attributed to the newly elected Hardy, who called for an "honest conversation" about moving forward at Yucca Mountain in a newspaper editorial last month.

Thursday, Hardy said the trip gave him a better understanding of how Yucca Mountain is set up and what the plans are should it be approved.

"The reason I'm here is because this is in my district and I want to know what's going on,"

he said. "Let's have the open discussion about the science, make sure it's safe and then we can have the discussion about moving forward."

Hardy said much of the debate so far has been polarized, but if after an "open discussion" Nevadans still don't want the project, then he would oppose it.

Other congressional members on Thursday's trip echoed the sentiment of listening to Nevadans, but indicated that they think Yucca Mountain is a good fit for a repository.

"I was very impressed by what I saw today. The potential for this as a waste site to me is huge and shows a lot of promise," Newhouse said. "I want to be sure that what we do here is the right thing; from what I've seen today I'm very optimistic it is."

Latta, the Ohio representative, said action is needed "sooner than later" to move forward on building a repository.

"The studies have been done and this is where the studies say that this should be stored," he said.

But Nevada officials take issue with those studies, underscoring the "choose your own facts" nature of the debate that has surrounded Yucca Mountain for decades.

Bob Halstead, executive director of Nevada's Agency for Nuclear Projects, said there are numerous issues — the state has identified 219 — with storing nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain. They range from how the waste would be transported to the site, including possible routes through Las Vegas, how it would be safely packaged and even the risk of earthquakes disrupting the long-term storage.

Most critical, Halstead said, is the risk of groundwater contamination caused by water dripping through the top of the mountain, onto the storage casks and into the water table over the course of thousands of years.

The Yucca Mountain repository would be located 1,000 feet below the surface of the mountain and another 1,000 feet above the water table, a buffer that studies have found would be safe for storage for a million years, although Halstead and other state-backed scientists contest the findings.

"We know (groundwater contamination) is going to happen. It's just a matter of how much, how fast and how far it moves," Halstead said.

Instead of an above-ground repository at Yucca Mountain, Halstead said the waste should be stored deep underground below the water table in salt beds or granite formations, a solution being pursued by other countries like Canada, Sweden and Switzerland.

Looking ahead, Shimkus plans to introduce a bill in the coming months to restart the stalled Yucca Mountain project. He said he was open to negotiating with Nevada officials for added compensation and benefits in return for accepting the repository.

"I want (Nevada) to be assured that they would have a large role in the decisions on siting, infrastructure, rail spurs, roads," Shimkus said. "They should be rewarded for taking this national priority."

Reid, Heller, Titus and Rep. Joe Heck introduced bills last month that face slim odds of passing that would require state consent before any nuclear repository moves forward. Even if the Yucca Mountain licensing process does start up again, it would require lengthy trial-like hearings over the science behind the project, meaning it would be years before any nuclear waste would start arriving in Nevada.

"All we're asking of the state of Nevada is to talk to us," Shimkus said. "We've already spent 30 years and \$15 billion. The question is will we spend another 30 years and another \$15 billion to get to a place where we're not even open yet?"

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