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Symbolically, a door closes for nuclear dump at Yucca

Fenced-off tunnel seen as progress by those for and against

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Washington — This may speak volumes about the status of the beleaguered Yucca Mountain nuclear waste dump project: A chain-link fence now blocks the entrance to the tunnel that leads inside.

The Energy Department's contractor says daily operations at the nation's planned nuclear waste repository are being put "on standby" in the face of massive budget cuts engineered by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid.

All on-site jobs, save for a few sentries', are being eliminated. More layoffs are on the way. Resources are being shifted at a critical juncture in the project's life.

As Nevadans constantly seek signs that Yucca Mountain is really dead, is a 6-foot barrier blocking entry to the tunnel the tocsin?

"It's clear the dump is dying," said Reid spokesman Jon Summers. "This is one of the most significant moves we've seen to signal the end of the dump. They closed the tunnel ... That's all there is, is that tunnel."

Yes and no.

Psychologically, shutting down the site feels like an omen. It's even worse than last spring, when the train that once carried visitors deep into Yucca Mountain's back alcoves stopped running. Closing up the tunnel seems like the beginning of the end.

The project is certainly at a crossroads. Its currently proposed opening date is 20 years behind schedule and even Yucca Mountain's most ardent supporters on Capitol Hill are losing patience.

Yet at the same time, the Energy Department soldiers on. It has pledged to hit a June deadline to submit its application to license the facility. Much is riding on that promise it blew the deadline four years ago.

Project advocates say the layoffs should come as no surprise after the financial hit, and they say the cuts don't matter. Most of the on-site research work is done, and the tunnel is merely a PR tool until it is put to use as a tomb for the waste.

The real work now, Yucca's advocates say, is being done by the scientists and lawyers behind computers at offices in Las Vegas and elsewhere as they work toward the June deadline.

John Keeley, a spokesman for the Nuclear Energy Institute, the leading trade group for the industry, said, "Nothing indicates it's a setback for the project."

So again, if a gate over the entrance doesn't do it, when will we know that Yucca Mountain is dead?

Last year, one of the answers to that question was that the project's demise would be evident if it were delivered a serious financial blow. Check. That happened in December when Congress cut \$100 million from Yucca Mountain, slicing more than 20 percent off the project's budget.

Fallout from the budget cut is being felt. In addition to the 63 layoffs by month's end, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has been forced to cancel a public meeting this month in Las Vegas as it reduces its travel budget. A part of the commission budget that funds Yucca Mountain was similarly reduced by Reid's maneuver.

Next week the Energy Department's project director, Edward Sproat, will, at various public functions in Nevada, address the project's future in the face of steep budget cuts.

Another indicator would be if President Bush failed to fully fund the project as he releases his 2009 priorities during the State of the Union speech this month or in the budget proposal in February.

But probably the greatest test of Yucca's livelihood is happening right outside your door, where the Democratic presidential candidates who are stumping for support in the Nevada caucus say they oppose the project and some have pledged to kill it outright.

Nevada Democratic Rep. Shelley Berkley said even though shuttering the tunnel is an acknowledgement by the Energy Department that the project is suffering, it's too early to write Yucca's obituary.

"We've got a long way to go before Yucca Mountain is pronounced dead," Berkley said. "It's going to take the next president of the United States to pull the plug on this project."

Despite outward support for Yucca Mountain, even the nuclear industry has begun to move on from the plan, now decades in the making, to bury the nuclear fuel from the nation's power plants in the Nevada desert. Some industry executives think waste can be stored at the plants for up to 100 years, a plan the Nevada delegation has advocated. The industry is moving forward to develop new nuclear reactors to meet the nation's growing energy needs despite setbacks at Yucca.

A spokesman for Nevada Republican Rep. Jon Porter, who is in France surveying nuclear reprocessing options, said the end is near.

"Yucca Mountain is in trouble, not just because of reduced funding," spokesman Matt Leffingwell said, "but because there continues to be a lack of confidence in this project."

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