

Statement of Hillary Rodham Clinton
Hearing: Full Committee hearing entitled, "Examination of the
Licensing Process for the Yucca Mountain Repository."
Wednesday, October 31, 2007

I want to begin by thanking Chairman Boxer for holding this hearing. I think it is particularly timely because we are nearing a critical stage of the process, which is the June 2008 date when the Department of Energy plans to submit a license application for Yucca Mountain to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

So I think it's important that we use this hearing to get the Administration on record in response to some important, unanswered questions about how this process will work.

I want to start by stating what the available scientific evidence makes clear: Yucca Mountain is not a safe place to store spent fuel from our nation's nuclear reactors.

First off, Yucca Mountain is located in an area of considerable seismic activity. There are 32 known active faults at or near Yucca Mountain; there have been more than 600 seismic events registering above 2.5 on the Richter scale within a 50-mile radius of Yucca Mountain in the last 30 years. In 1992, an earthquake registering 5.6 on the Richter scale occurred just eight miles away. And just last month, it was reported that the Department of Energy had to alter plans at the site after rock samples unexpectedly revealed a fault line underneath the proposed location of the concrete pads where waste would cool before going into the repository.

Looking forward, scientists have predicted that an earthquake registering 6 or more on the Richter scale is likely to occur in the next 10,000 years, given that Nevada is the third-most earthquake-prone state in the country after California and Alaska.

An even greater potential risk at the site is its history of volcanic activity. As an MIT geologist testified to this committee last year, and I quote:

"Though the likelihood of an explosive volcano erupting directly beneath the repository is remote, the outcome would be devastating, spewing radioactive material directly into the atmosphere. End quote.

In addition, the rock at the site has proven to be more porous than the Department of Energy once thought, raising major concerns about contamination of scarce groundwater less than 100 miles from Las Vegas. In

recent years, scientists discovered that radiation from nuclear tests done in the 1950s had migrated downward with rain water to more than six hundred feet below ground—rates far faster than predicted by Department of Energy. This poses the threat of corrosion of the containers in which the waste would be stored, as well as the potential for much more rapid spread of contamination in groundwater.

Because of these many flaws in the geology of the site, the DOE has turned to what it calls “engineered controls” to try to contain the waste. In other words, the containers that the waste would be stored in are to be trusted to resist rusting for hundreds of thousands of years under intense heat and the presence of humidity.

Given these problems, it is not surprising that the Administration has been so opaque about the licensing process. As the testimony of Nevada’s Attorney General makes clear, the licensing process puts the cart before the horse. EPA has yet to finalize the radiation standards that [DOE] must prove it will be able to meet in order to license the repository, and the NRC has stated they will accept the application even if EPA standards are not in place when it is filed.

Madame Chairman, does this make sense at all? Is this site and this process really the best we can do?

I know that some believe that Yucca Mountain is a referendum on the future of nuclear power, or that the waste accumulating across the country is imperative enough to override the clear problems with the site. I strongly disagree. That’s why I voted against the resolution overriding Nevada’s veto of Yucca Mountain in July of 2002, and that’s why I remain opposed today.

We do need to find a long-term storage solution for our nation’s nuclear waste. But Yucca Mountain is not the answer. It’s time to step back and take a deep breath. The twenty-five years since the Nuclear Waste Policy Act passed seems like a long time ago. But this is a decision that future generations will live with for hundreds of thousands of years—longer than any of us can imagine.

So we need to get it right. It’s time to move on from Yucca Mountain. I believe we should start over, and assemble our best scientific minds to identify alternatives. In the meantime, we need to make sure we are storing waste safely and securely at the reactor sites where it’s located today. And we need to do better thinking about the massive challenge of transporting waste safely and securely from reactor sites to a permanent repository.

What we should not do is to push an incomplete application for a flawed site through a rushed and incoherent process. But unfortunately, it is clear from the testimony submitted by our witnesses representing the Administration that that

is precisely the course of action that this Administration intends to pursue. I think we can do better, and I hope that we will get the chance to do that.

And, Madame Chairman, again thank you for holding this critical hearing.