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Energy chief defends Yucca Mountain determination

By STEVE TETREAU
STEPHENS WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON -- Energy Secretary Steven Chu on Thursday defended the decision to terminate the Yucca Mountain program, telling senators at a budget hearing the Nevada repository plan is being set aside in a search for "better solutions."

Chu encountered push-back from several Republican senators on the decision during a hearing on the Energy Department's fiscal 2011 budget.

In his first appearance before Congress since announcing he would withdraw a construction application for the Nevada site, Chu said ending the repository program is a turn, and not an end, to the government's efforts to managing radioactive spent fuel from nuclear plants.

"We are still going to move forward," Chu said. "We don't think the pulling of the Yucca application means we are at a standstill, but I do believe there are better solutions."

Chu told senators he would rely on a 15-member commission that was named last week to recommend a path forward after a two-year study.

But Sen. Richard Burr, R-N.C., questioned the need for a panel. He also questioned whether banks will back the construction of new nuclear plants if the waste issue is unsettled.

"We have to pick a path and go for it," Burr said. "We either know something and we should do it, or we are going to kick this can down the road, which I am tired of doing."

Chu said solutions would be found. "Given that, there is no reason to be a little bit tepid" about building new reactors, he said.

Chu said "we have decades" to decide because the Nuclear Regulatory Commission thinks that keeping radioactive waste at power plants is safe for at least another 50 years.

Burr and Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, challenged the decision to continue charging nuclear power consumers fees for repository construction. The nuclear waste fund has raised \$33 billion in fees and interest since 1983.

"You are the one who will have to tell ratepayers there is not a plan for permanent storage but they are going to continue to be soaked by the federal government," Burr said. "They have been paying into this for years, and they have nothing."

In answer to a question from Sen. Blanche Lincoln, D-Ark., about the potential to reprocess nuclear waste, Chu said current technology is not the answer because it is too expensive and because the process creates nuclear weapons-grade byproducts.

There might be other answers, Chu said, including the possibility of extracting more energy from

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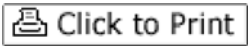
nuclear fuel as it initially is burned to generate electricity.

"It is not clear what the path is, but that is what research is about," he said.

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