

NUCLEAR POLICY:

NRC will complete environmental review of Yucca project -- chairman

Hannah Northey, E&E reporter, Greenwire: Tuesday, February 17, 2015

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission intends to complete an environmental review of the contentious waste repository under Yucca Mountain in Nevada because the Energy Department has refused to do so, the NRC's chairman said today.

"The decision is we will do that since [the Department of Energy] told us they won't be doing it," NRC Chairman Stephen Burns told reporters at the Platts 11th Annual Nuclear Energy Conference in Washington, D.C., today. "We have the funds that are left over from the carryover for high-level waste, will cover the preparation of the supplemental [environmental impact statement]."

Burns made the comments following his first public speech as chairman, in which he called for a leaner, more efficient agency to match a workload made lighter by a potential nuclear expansion in the United States that never materialized. Although the NRC ramped up for a raft of anticipated new reactors in 2006, the industry has since seen a sharp decline. Applications were pulled and work dissipated amid a recession and the United States' discovery of cheap shale gas.

"Now, perhaps more than ever, the NRC is being scrutinized by its stakeholders for its responsible use of resources, as well as for the regulatory requirements it imposes on its licensees," Burns said.

The NRC's environmental review of the Yucca site is a critical step toward moving the project forward. The NRC last month found the project could be built and operated safely but recommended that the agency not authorize construction until the environmental review was complete and outstanding land and water rights issues were addressed (E&ENews PM, Jan. 29).

A federal appeals court in 2013 ordered the NRC to resume licensing the Yucca site using appropriated funds in the Nuclear Waste Fund. The NRC had asked the Energy Department in 2008 to prepare a supplemental environmental impact

statement needed to review the Yucca Mountain application under the National Environmental Policy Act.

At that time, concerns were high that the water table -- which is about 1,000 feet below the proposed repository -- was insufficiently protected from radiation and that many people's drinking and agricultural water would be exposed.

But a DOE official last year said the agency would instead update 2009 findings that groundwater in the area would be safe, noting that Yucca Mountain's desert environment in the rain shadow of the Sierra Nevada has not changed. That announcement put the burden on the NRC.

Despite what some observers say is growing interest in a Republican Congress to advance Yucca Mountain, the Obama administration and a majority of Nevada's delegation continue to fight the project.

Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz recently reiterated that Yucca Mountain doesn't have public support and is not a workable solution, a point that three Nevada lawmakers -- Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid and Republicans Sen. Dean Heller of Nevada and Gov. Brian Sandoval -- hammered home in a letter to The Washington Post this week.

"If Yucca Mountain has taught us anything, it is that continuing to try to force the repository on Nevada only gets the nation further away from a real solution," the senators and Sandoval wrote.