

Yucca plan may soon be put to rest

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By Kenny Guinn

During my two terms as Nevada's governor, perhaps no single issue has been as vexing and problematic as the efforts of the federal government to locate a repository for highly radioactive waste and spent nuclear fuel at Yucca Mountain, just 90 miles from Las Vegas.

Now, after years of strong, sustained and unified opposition by the state, its political leaders, congressional delegation, citizens, local governments and others, Yucca Mountain finally and deservedly appears to be headed toward the trash bin of history.

In 2002, I issued a statement outlining reasons why I had disapproved the president's decision to recommend Yucca Mountain as a nuclear waste repository. In that statement, I observed: "Yucca Mountain is but the latest in a long series of Department of Energy (DOE) boondoggles -- one based on bad science, bad law and bad public policy." More than \$2 billion of taxpayer and ratepayer dollars later, Congress finally appears to have reached the same conclusion.

U.S. Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee Chairman Pete Domenici, a prominent supporter of nuclear power and the nuclear industry, recently introduced new legislation that shifts focus from the failed Yucca Mountain program to the concept of interim storage, either at existing reactor locations or at regional "consolidation and preparation" facilities. The legislation, subsequently approved by the full committee, implicitly recognizes for the first time that the country is on the wrong track in its approach to dealing with spent nuclear fuel and high-level radioactive waste.

Even so, recent media coverage of the DOE's revised Yucca Mountain schedule clearly demonstrates that officials at DOE's Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management will continue the agency's bureaucratic effort to keep the fiction surrounding this site alive.

As with other major federal programs that have ultimately collapsed under the weight of shoddy science, excessive costs and strong opposition, the Yucca Mountain program is not likely to simply disappear overnight, and Sen. Domenici may have envisioned such an eventuality when he suggested that the time has come to put Yucca on the "back burner."

The Yucca Mountain fight has been a long and difficult one. Nevadans can be justifiably proud of how the state has pulled together to bring this dangerous, ill-advised and unnecessary project to a standstill. Nevada has often stood alone in opposing the project and exposing Yucca's fraudulent science, excessive costs and unacceptable impacts and risks. Nevada also has been at the forefront of the effort to alert the nation to the tremendous hazards associated with transporting thousands of shipments of deadly radioactive waste across the country to an unsafe site in Nevada.

It has been Nevada's strong and unyielding opposition over the past two decades that has prevented an out-of-control federal bureaucracy from making a mistake of unprecedented proportions, which would impact many generations of citizens -- in Nevada and around the U.S. -- for thousands of years.

Although the battle is not yet over, I am very encouraged by the new thinking and direction in Congress. Thanks to the sustained efforts of all Nevadans, we may finally be seeing the light at the end of the Yucca Mountain tunnel and the beginning of a new chapter in the nation's approach to solving the nuclear waste problem.

Kenny Guinn is governor of Nevada.