



November 10, 2008

## New president should call halt to Yucca Mountain plan

The U.S. Department of Energy last week essentially admitted that many critics of the planned nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain have been right: By the time the underground dump opens (currently scheduled for 2020 at the earliest), it will be too small to handle the nuclear waste generated at power plants in this country.

What better time could there be to halt work on the plan to bury nuclear waste out of sight and out of mind? What better time could there be -- with a new Democratic president set to take office in January and Nevada Sen. Harry Reid, who has vowed to stop the dump, leading an expanded Democratic majority in the Senate -- to begin the search for a smarter, more responsible solution to the nation's nuclear waste problem?

Edward Sproat, head of the civilian nuclear waste program at the DOE, told a conference last week that Congress must either remove a 77,000-ton limit on the Yucca Mountain project or start looking for a site for a second dump. Under the continuing pressure of a unanimous delegation from Nevada, Congress is unlikely to approve the former, and the law that designated Nevada the only site for the high-level nuclear waste repository, makes the latter impossible.

Yet, it is widely agreed the whipsawing energy prices of recent months have made a new round of nuclear power plant building in the U.S. inevitable. President-elect Barack Obama gave cautious support to nuclear power in his campaign for the presidency (though he said he opposed Yucca Mountain), and work on a new generation of plants could begin within years.

The No. 1 challenge to those plans, however, will be finding a solution to the growing waste problem. Digging a bigger hole in Nevada or digging another hole somewhere else is not the answer.

In one of his earliest actions, the new president should convene a blue-ribbon panel of nuclear experts, not just from the United States but from all over the world, to develop a comprehensive plan for dealing with the waste that currently is piling up at nuclear power plants around the country. That plan certainly could include some form of the reprocessing that is practiced in other countries. But it also should include research into ways that the waste could be made less dangerous to the public or other ways that the waste can be put to productive, economically feasible use.

While opposition to burial in Nevada would continue, the state's two universities and the Desert Research Institute would undoubtedly be very happy to take part in that research.

The results of last week's election promised a new look at the nation's energy policy, a new look that almost certainly will include more non-polluting nuclear power. It also should promise the end of plans to dump nuclear waste in a hole in the Nevada desert.

## Additional Facts

SNAPSHOT

TOPIC: Energy policy

OUR VIEW: A blue-ribbon panel should be convened to find a better way to deal with nuclear waste.

---