

# Las Vegas Review Journal

## Tennessee senator ready to force showdown on Yucca Mountain

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WASHINGTON — The fate of the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository could be decided in the Senate this year where Sen. Lamar Alexander said he will seek an up or down vote on the Nevada site before he writes spending legislation to revive the project.

Alexander, R-Tenn., the chairman of the Senate Appropriations subcommittee on energy, told the Review-Journal he will seek a Senate floor vote this year on Yucca Mountain before he moves legislation to fund the licensing process to determine if the site is safe.

“What I would like for us to do is decide the Yucca Mountain question,” Alexander said.

“We either move ahead with it,” Alexander said, or Congress should move on with other forms of distribution of nuclear waste.

“We’ve had about a 35-year stalemate on this issue and it’s time to break up the stalemate and come to a decision,” Alexander told the Review-Journal.

A House committee voted last week to keep money for Yucca Mountain out of its spending bill for the Department of Energy.

The entire Nevada congressional delegation lobbied fellow lawmakers to vote against funding for hearings on the department’s application to build a nuclear waste facility outside Las Vegas.

Rep. Mark Amodei, R-Nev., the only Silver State lawmaker on the House Appropriations Committee, voted with Democrats to block an amendment by Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, to add \$74 million in the energy spending bill to advance the Yucca Mountain project.

“Make no mistake, this is a major victory for Nevada,” said Democrat Rep. Dina Titus, the dean of the state’s congressional delegation.

“As we keep an eye on the Senate, my efforts will be focused on advancing consent-based storage for nuclear waste,” Titus said of her legislation that would require permission from local governments, tribes and the state’s governor to construct a facility to store nuclear waste.

## **Senate Yucca bills**

There are two bills that have been filed in the Senate to address nuclear waste storage. Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., chairman of the Environment and Public Works Committee, has legislation that would fast-track opening of licensing hearings and development of Yucca Mountain.

Another bill, whose co-sponsors include Alexander, would seek changes in the law to allow private contractors to store waste at interim sites while a permanent facility is constructed. That bill includes Yucca Mountain as a permanent repository.

But first, Alexander wants a decision on Yucca Mountain, designated by Congress in 1987 as the sole site for permanent storage of nuclear waste produced by power plants and Navy ships.

“So the House’s decision will be important, and now it’s up to the Senate to see what we think. The way to do that is to vote on it,” Alexander said.

“I think there should be a vote in the Senate this year on Yucca Mountain,” Alexander said. “If it gets 60 votes, why then the Senate would be for moving ahead for one more year of funding to determine whether Yucca Mountain is safe.”

He said his committee would then draw up a spending bill that includes funds for licensing to continue development on the Nevada site.

If a vote on Yucca Mountain legislation does not garner the 60 votes to advance, then Alexander said Congress should move ahead with a bipartisan proposal with Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., for interim storage sites, congressional authority to store waste at private storage sites and a search for a permanent repository.

## **Opponents face steep hurdle in Senate**

Nuclear waste is currently stockpiled at 121 sites in 39 states, where lawmakers are clamoring for the federal government to remove the radioactive material as required by the 1987 law.

Further, the three-decade delay to address the waste storage issue has left a buildup of more than 100,000 metric tons of waste at those sites, far more than the 70,000 metric tons the 1987 law contemplates for storage at Yucca Mountain.

The failure of the Department of Energy to remove and store the waste is costing taxpayers \$2.2 million a day.

Lawmakers with nuclear power plants, and those that have been decommissioned, will be hard-pressed to vote against a bill to revive licensing hearings on a desert site in Nevada that was initially deemed safe by the Energy Department.

More than \$19 billion has been spent on research and site development, said Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev., who argues that no more should be spent on a site located in an active seismic area with potential to pollute groundwater.

Sen. Jacky Rosen, D-Nev., said she plans to meet with Alexander after the Senate returns from a Memorial Day recess.

Rosen has concerns about the Yucca Mountain location near the Nellis Air Force Range, a munitions testing area for combat aircraft.

“What’s in the center of Nevada? Seventy percent of our Air Force live munition (training) is at the Nevada test and training range. We’re the premier pilot training (schools) for the Air Force and the Navy,” Rosen said.

“Transporting nuclear waste through that could put our national security at risk,” she added.

### **United delegation**

Rosen said the Nevada delegation, all six lawmakers in the House and Senate, were crucial in the House victory last week. She said she would enthusiastically carry that effort now to the Senate.

“This is a states’ rights issue. Why should one state be treated different from the others,” Rosen said of the decision in 1987 to designate Nevada as the sole site for permanent nuclear waste.

Not everyone in Nevada is opposed to Yucca Mountain. Nye County, where the site is located, and other rural counties, want licensing hearings to continue to determine if the location is safe, which could result in construction and high-paying jobs with increased tax revenues.

Proponents of Yucca Mountain can still try to amend the spending bill when it reaches the full House, although the likelihood that that would happen is slight because of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s opposition.

Rep. Steven Horsford, D-Nev., whose congressional district includes Yucca Mountain, Rep. Susie Lee, D-Nev., and Titus met with Pelosi and enlisted her help in keeping funding out of the House spending bill.

[President Donald Trump is seeking \\$116 million for licensing hearings](#) and an interim storage study in his [budget request for fiscal year 2020](#), which begins Oct. 1.

Regardless of how the Senate votes, the victory in the House Appropriations Committee gives leverage to keep spending out of a final House-Senate conference committee bill.

“I’m not letting my guard down just yet. There are still a few more hurdles for us to clear,” Lee said.

“When the president signs an appropriations bill without funding for Yucca Mountain, that’s when we will be able to finally declare a victory,” she said.

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