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President's Pick For Energy Sec Talks Yucca Mountain

Says He'll Work To Remove Secret Plutonium Shipments



ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Deputy Energy Secretary Dan Brouillette also said under questioning from Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev., at a committee hearing on his nomination in Washington D.C. that the department won't take any action to restart efforts to build a nuclear waste repository at Nevada's Yucca Mountain before Congress decides whether to finance the effort.

"I can give you the assurance as secretary that until Congress makes a decision on Yucca Mountain, nothing will happen at the Department of Energy," Brouillette told the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

Nevada is currently in federal court in Reno for the second time in a year seeking a judge's order to force removal of the plutonium the U.S. government trucked to a site near Yucca Mountain last year over the state's objections.

Outgoing Secretary Rick Perry, who announced his resignation last month, said in a letter to Cortez Masto in April the Energy Department intends to start removing the highly radioactive material in 2021 and finish by the end of 2026.

Cortez Masto said Brouillette assured her during a private meeting this week he was committed to honoring that agreement and asked him to do so publicly at Thursday's hearing.

"I will give you a firm commitment that we will honor the agreement," he said.

A federal judge in Reno refused earlier this year to issue a temporary injunction banning shipments of the radioactive material to Nevada after the government disclosed in January it already had trucked one-half metric ton of plutonium there.

The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals refused to overturn that decision in August, agreeing the matter was moot because the plutonium was already there.

The San Francisco-based court declined to consider a new request to force removal of the material because Nevada's original lawsuit didn't seek such relief, but U.S. Magistrate Carla Baldwin in Reno agreed last month to allow the state to amend the suit to include that request.

Lauren Wodarski, Cortez Masto's press secretary, said after Thursday's hearing that the senator welcomes Brouillette's commitment to "to maintain the Department of Energy's agreement with her and the people of Nevada" regarding the plutonium. She declined to say whether she

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an email to the Associated Press.

The Yucca Mountain project — first proposed in the 1980s to hold 77,000 tons (70,000 metric tons) of highly radioactive spent fuel in tunnels bored under an ancient volcanic ridge northwest of Las Vegas — was shelved in 2010 under pressure from then-Senate Democratic Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada and President Barack Obama.

The Trump administration recently revived a request for money to restart federal licensing process for the project, but Rep. Dina Titus, D-Nev., and others have successfully beat back the necessary funding so far in Congress.

Brouillette didn't directly respond when Cortez Masto asked Thursday if he supports storing nuclear waste at Yucca. He said it is up to Congress to decide whether to resume the project, but that he wouldn't spend any money that hadn't been appropriated by Congress to pursue the administration's policy directives.

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