

Las Vegas Review Journal

Private Yucca meeting upsets Nevada officials

March 13, 2018

Posted at: <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/politics-and-government/nevada/private-yucca-meeting-upsets-nevada-officials/>

WASHINGTON — A March meeting between Nye County officials and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission chairwoman, who would oversee any future [proceeding to determine if Yucca Mountain is safe for nuclear waste storage](#), drew the ire of Nevada and its lawmakers on Tuesday.

A Nye County spokesman described the March 5 meeting as nothing more than an introduction and short conversation with NRC Chairwoman Kristine Svinicki, but the state objected to the private meeting because the federal agency must adjudicate challenges to a license to construct a repository at Yucca Mountain.

Nye County supports efforts to permanently store nuclear waste at the Nevada site, while the state and most members of the congressional delegation are opposed to shipping and storing radioactive materials at a repository just 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

Rep. Dina Titus, D-Nev., said the NRC needs to “come clean” on the private meeting with Nye County stakeholders in the Yucca Mountain adjudication.

“There are very specific rules that clearly were not followed. We need answers,” Titus said.

Nye County Commissioner Dan Schinhofen said Svinicki was “flanked by a lawyer on each side.”

“We made a pitch that when they do have hearings ... we ask that they consider holding the hearings here in Nye County,” Schinhofen said by telephone. He said Svinicki did not make a commitment.

In a March 12 letter to the NRC, Bob Halstead, executive director of the Nevada governor’s agency for nuclear projects, said the commission’s own rules prohibit ex-parte communications with Nye County, even though the licensing procedure is currently suspended.

Nevada and other parties with an interest in Yucca Mountain were notified about the meeting in a memorandum by the senior legal counsel for the NRC chairwoman. The memo said no discussions about challenges to a license for Yucca Mountain were discussed.

In his letter to the NRC, Halstead said “reasonable persons” would be justified in asking “why Nye County would want to meet with you for any reason other than to discuss the pending application.”

A Nye County spokesman said Commissioners Schinhofen, Lorinda Wichman and County Manager Tim Sutton were in Washington for the National Association of Counties conference.

The Nye County officials also met with other federal officials. More than 90 percent of Nye County is federal land.

Schinhofen characterized the state’s objection as a waste of taxpayers’ money.

Congress in 1987 designated Yucca Mountain in Nye County as the nation’s permanent storage site for nuclear waste from power plants nationwide. More than \$15 billion has been spent to study the site.

An application by the Department of Energy for a license from the NRC to construct a facility was suspended by the Obama administration.

President Donald Trump is seeking \$120 million in his budget blueprint for the DOE to resume the licensing process. The NRC is seeking \$47 million to hire staff for that process.

But the House and Senate remain at odds over how to move forward on nuclear waste storage.

A bill is pending in the House to increase storage at Yucca Mountain when licensed. Key senators have voiced support for more interim storage to eliminate a growing stockpile at nuclear plants across the country.

Gov. Brian Sandoval, a Republican, has vowed to fight any federal effort to establish a nuclear repository in the state.

The state’s two U.S. Sens., Dean Heller, a Republican, and Catherine Cortez Masto, a Democrat, have filed legislation that would require local states, governments and Native American tribes to be consulted before designating a site for nuclear storage.

Titus also has filed legislation for consensus-based siting. Reps. Jacky Rosen and Ruben Kihuen, both Nevada Democrats, have backed state efforts to stop construction at Yucca Mountain.

Rep. Mark Amodei, R-Nev., and nine rural Nevada counties, including Nye, have argued that the licensing process should continue to determine whether Yucca Mountain is safe for permanent storage.

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