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House bill wants study of alternative uses for Yucca Mountain

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WASHINGTON — A House bill expected to be filed Thursday would prohibit the Energy Department from taking any action to license Yucca Mountain as a nuclear repository until the federal government studies alternative uses for the Nevada site.

Rep. Jacky Rosen, D-Nev., the bill's sponsor, said the legislation would direct the Office of Management and Budget to conduct a study on alternative uses, including defense activities like a command facility for unmanned aircraft.

The bill is the latest attempt by Nevada lawmakers to block the licensing application process halted in 2011. The Trump administration and a House committee have pushed for money to restart the licensing.

“My bill would prohibit the Department of Energy from moving forward with its dangerous and costly nuclear waste repository plan until it considers a number of other job-creating alternatives for this project,” Rosen said in a statement.

Mick Mulvaney, a former South Carolina congressman, used his position as OMB director to slip funds into a 2018 budget bill that would restart the process to license Yucca Mountain, which was stopped under the Obama administration.

South Carolina is one of 39 states with nuclear energy plants that are producing waste. The waste is stockpiling at the plants because the federal government has failed to license and develop Yucca Mountain, which was designated by Congress as the nation's permanent nuclear waste repository in 1987.

Funding to restart licensing for Yucca Mountain in fiscal 2018, which began Oct. 1, died after House and Senate negotiators failed to reach an agreement and place it in a final spending bill. While the House included the funding, the Senate did not.

Rosen's bill could face headwinds in the House Energy and Commerce Committee. That panel passed a bill authorizing funding and streamlining the process to open Yucca Mountain, about 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

Republicans and Democrats on the committee overwhelmingly approved the bill, 49-4, last May. It could come to the House floor as early as next month.

Rosen is a member of the House Armed Services Committee. She urged top lawmakers on that panel to prevent legislation authorizing Yucca Mountain spending from moving forward, citing concerns by the Air Force in carrying out missions at the Nevada Test and Training Range.

She also asked appropriators not to approve funding in spending bills for Yucca Mountain in fiscal 2019.

Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev., issued a letter Wednesday to the Senate Appropriations subcommittee on energy and water development asking that the panel again not include funding for Yucca Mountain.

The chairman of the subcommittee, Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., said this month that he plans to file a bipartisan bill that would place more emphasis on interim storage of nuclear waste until permanent repositories, which would include Yucca Mountain, could be developed.

Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval has vowed to use state resources to stop federal efforts to store nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain. He is backed by most of the state's congressional delegation.

Rep. Mark Amodei, R-Nev., and rural Nevada counties, including Nye County, where Yucca Mountain is located, support continuation of licensing to determine if the site is safe for nuclear storage.

Proponents say development of Yucca Mountain would be a boon in high-paying federal jobs that would locate to the rural area.

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