

LAS VEGAS SUN

Some say Yucca Mountain could be a blessing. Others aren't convinced.

...g forward with plans to build a proposed nuclear waste storage facility in a portion of the county and approximately 90 miles from Las Vegas.

But those who live in the region immediately surrounding Yucca are split on whether storing approximately 70,000 tons of nuclear waste there is a good idea.

Spanning more than 18,000 square miles, Nye County is the largest county by area in Nevada, with a population of 44,200. Some in Nye see Yucca Mountain as a potential bringer of economic development and jobs to a county where nearly 19% of residents live below the poverty line.

Others say the environmental and human health risks of transporting and storing nuclear waste there are too high, and unjust, considering that Nevada doesn't produce any nuclear energy. Nevada's senators, Gov. Steve Sisolak, most of the state's congressional representatives and officials in Clark County share similar opposition.

Nonetheless, Nye County commissioners are urging lawmakers in the Senate to support the Nuclear Waste Policy Amendments Act of 2019, sponsored by Sen. John Barrasso (R-Wyo.), chairman of the Committee on Environment and Public Works.

The bill would restart the licensing process for establishing Yucca Mountain as the primary storage site for the country's spent nuclear fuel — a process started in 1987 that was halted in 2009 by the Obama administration. President Trump has signaled support for moving forward again with Yucca Mountain.

In a letter sent to Barrasso and Sen. Tom Carper (D-Del.), a ranking member of the Committee on Environment and Public Works, Nye County commissioners asked lawmakers to allow the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to begin reviewing the Yucca Mountain proposal. Eight other rural counties in Nevada also support resuming research on Yucca Mountain.

"Nye County, the site county, has favored a full and fair review of the science by the NRC for years. We want decisions to be made on Yucca Mountain to be based on facts and science, and not empty rhetoric and fear mongering," commissioners wrote on April 30.

Daryl Lacy, director of National Resources and Federal Facilities for Nye County, explained that the county's history of nuclear activities — the Nevada Test Site remains the largest employer in Nye County — has convinced many residents that nuclear waste projects aren't inherently dangerous. He says Yucca Mountain could bring "several thousand highly paid jobs" to Nye County.

“We understand that some of these types of activities are not clean and easy and may not necessarily make a good business to have in the city of Las Vegas, but we’re 100 miles away,” Lacy said.

At the same time, he emphasized that the county is not “pro-Yucca Mountain.” Rather, officials support resuming discussions about how waste could be transported and stored there safely, as well as the financial benefits that the county and the state would get in return.

“Many of the people here understand that yes, there’s risks, yes, it’s a nasty material, but it can be handled appropriately. And it’s not necessarily any worse than other things that have been done here in the past,” Lacy said, referring to nuclear detonations at the Nevada Test Site in the 1950s.

Philip Coyle, a board member for the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, a nonpartisan think tank that advocates for a reduction of nuclear weapons worldwide, agrees that a nuclear repository could be built and managed safely at Yucca Mountain. He explained that it is in the United States’ best interest to find a permanent solution for its nuclear waste — and Yucca Mountain seems to be the only location identified at this point.

“Even though some people in Nevada don’t think it’s a very good idea and don’t like it, nobody has found a better place, so the impasse continues,” said Coyle, who previously served as assistant secretary of defense and director of operational test and evaluation at the Pentagon.

The United States has 98 nuclear reactors operating in 30 states — Nevada isn’t among them — which have produced approximately 90,000 tons of nuclear waste and counting. Most of that waste is stored on-site at the reactors using dry cask storage, intended to be a temporary solution for the hazardous radioactive byproducts of nuclear energy production.

But dry cask storage isn’t an ideal long-term solution for the material, Coyle said. Continuing to store nuclear waste in so many temporary facilities across the country could pose security and safety risks for those living near those sites, especially in the event of a natural disaster or terrorist attack.

Coyle sees two paths forward for the country’s nuclear waste: develop Yucca Mountain as a permanent repository, or establish monitored, retrievable, better protected storage on-site at nuclear reactors — the favored solution of many opposed to Yucca Mountain.

“Yucca Mountain is a more long-range solution, but it’s not an easy one,” Coyle said.

Residents in Nye, other counties split on Yucca Mountain

Some residents in the area surrounding Yucca Mountain seem to recognize the need to safely store the country’s nuclear waste and aren’t bothered by the idea of doing so in their backyards.

“It’s got to go somewhere,” said Debbie Mendyk, the deputy town clerk for Amargosa Valley, the closest town to the site some 17 miles from Yucca Mountain.

Mendyk, who has lived in Amargosa since 1969, says locals aren’t swayed by “fear mongering,” having lived through the days of detonations in the region. Residents experienced little to no negative consequences as a result of the nuclear activity at the test site, she said.

“Most of us, we’re used to this. We know what the stories are, and we don’t have problems with it,” said Mendyk, whose father worked at Yucca Mountain years ago.

Tom Jones, a Pahrump resident, is also open to storing nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain. The 80-year-old resident moved to Pahrump three years ago to retire, an incre

“If Yucca Mountain was designed to be a repository

“Admittedly, this radioactive material is nasty stuff
got to figure out how to deal.”

But others in the region aren't convinced that Yucca

Susan Sorrells, owner and manager of Shoshone Village just over the California border, says Yucca Mountain could be devastating for an area that increasingly relies on tourism to Death Valley National Park.

More than one million people visit Death Valley each year, and many of them stay in Shoshone's RV park or in one of its three bed and breakfasts, said Sorrells, a fourth-generation resident of the town of approximately 20-30 people. A substantial portion of the town's residents are scientists and researchers studying the area's rich biodiversity.

For Sorrells, Yucca Mountain would negatively impact the ecotourism that she has spearheaded at Shoshone. She also worries about impacts on the area's water supply, which she says is still compromised as a result of nuclear testing in the region decades ago.

"From a local point of view, it would bring incredible harm to our communities that are just starting to thrive," she said.

Patrick Donnelly, the Nevada State Director for the Center for Biological Diversity and a former Shoshone resident, raised concerns about effects on the region's endemic species and aquifer if Yucca Mountain were to move forward. While he understands that some in the area support the project, he believes that the environmental and safety risks outweigh potential economic benefits.

"I think at times, there can be a very myopic focus on economic development at the expense of the environment," Donnelly said.

Another source of opposition comes from Native Americans in the region, particularly the Timbisha Shoshone tribe. Many of the Timbisha's members live in Indian Village and Furnace Creek, Calif., close to Death Valley, the Nevada border and Yucca Mountain.

Joe Kennedy, former chairman of the Timbisha Shoshone, says the tribe is concerned about nuclear waste impacting the water supply near Indian Village. In addition, the Timbisha Shoshone opposes the project on moral grounds: The tribe is against harming the environment in the area, where Timbisha have lived for thousands of years, and against nuclear waste in general that may have been produced by the U.S Military as part of foreign wars.

Kennedy and Ian Zabarte, principal man for the larger Western Shoshone Nation that includes the Timbisha, further question whether the Timbisha would reap any of the supposed benefits of Yucca Mountain if it were to move forward. Having fought numerous legal battles with the federal government over territory and Yucca Mountain during the past licensing process, the Timbisha Shoshone have little confidence that Yucca Mountain would benefit, or be carried out with the consultation of, the tribe.

"We're expected to bear all of the adverse consequences from nuclear development without any benefits. That's environmental racism," Zabarte said.

Future of project remains in flux

As those living closest to Yucca Mountain continue to debate whether the project should move forward, its future remains unclear.

President Trump has attempted to restart the licensing process, having included \$116 million for the repository in his proposed Department of Energy Budget for next year.

But congressional opposition to the project has grown, and Democratic presidential hopefuls have come out against

Nevada's elected officials have also introduced mea

Cortez-Masto, for example, co-sponsored the "Jobs, Not Waste Act," which would prohibit the Department of Energy from moving forward with Yucca Mountain "until the federal government fully evaluates smart solutions," a representative for Rosen wrote in an email.

Lacy hopes that the state's leaders will at least be willing to look at the possibility of Yucca Mountain and will retire the position that everyone in Nevada is unequivocally opposed to the project.

"We've been portrayed as being pro-Yucca Mountain. We've been pro-science, is I think a better way to look at it," he said. "We think the rest of the decisions could be done in a way that's pro-science, so we'd like to see that."

Coyle, for his part, hopes that lawmakers recognize the danger of "doing nothing" and allowing nuclear waste to remain stored across the country in dry casks — a risk he says played out in real-time at Fukushima, Japan, in the aftermath of an earthquake in March 2011.

"When nobody is doing anything either way, at each reactor site or at Yucca Mountain, the whole problem becomes kind of out of sight, out of mind. And you risk not taking enough care at the reactor sites, not determining the best security, not having the best casks for storage and so forth," Coyle said.

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