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Nuclear panel moves toward licensing Nevada's Yucca Mountain



Members of a congressional tour of the Yucca Mountain exploratory tunnel enter the south portal, April 9, 2015. (Sam Morris/Las Vegas Review-Journal) By Gary Martin Review-Journal Washington Bureau **May 30, 2017 - 3:21 pm**

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WASHINGTON — Signals by the Trump administration to restart licensing on the Yucca Mountain drew new criticism Tuesday from lawmakers opposed to disposing high-level nuclear waste in Nevada.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission published Wednesday in the Federal Register a request for comment on collection of information on the Nevada site. The collection of information was previously authorized by the White House Office of Management and Budget.

The licensing process on Yucca Mountain began in 2008 but ended in 2010 when the Department of Energy, under the Obama administration, declared the site was no longer “a workable option.”

The Obama administration backed a consensus-based siting process to select a permanent storage site.

President Donald Trump has proposed to restart the licensing process and included \$120 million in his budget for the Department of Energy in fiscal year 2018.

The decision to restart the licensing process on Yucca Mountain was criticized by Sen. Ed Markey, D-Mass., a member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

“When it comes to nuclear waste storage, seismic matters,” Markey said.

Markey said in a statement that Yucca Mountain is located in an active earthquake zone with two fault lines running through it, making it a high-risk site.

“Restarting the licensing process for Yucca Mountain would reach new heights of scientific irresponsibility,” Markey said.

Yucca Mountain was selected by Congress in 1987 as the site for permanent storage of nuclear waste from electrical generating plants.

“The Obama administration was right to stop the licensing process for Yucca Mountain, whose selection was based more on political science than on real science,” Markey said.

The NRC is seeking comment from the state of Nevada, local governments and Native American tribes, or their representatives.

A request for comment by the NRC was not returned Tuesday. On Wednesday, an NRC spokesman, David McIntyre, said the request in the Federal Register was routine. He said another request would be made in about three months.

“They do not signify any action by the NRC to resume the Yucca Mountain licensing process. The Commission will need to take action and direct staff to resume the licensing process and hearing, should they decide to do so,” McIntyre said.

Nonetheless, the Trump administration and a House panel have signaled they will move toward restarting the licensing process. Nevada lawmakers encouraged public comments.

“I welcome a public comment period because it will give Nevada citizens and scientific experts the opportunity to once again express their opposition to this disastrous project,” said Rep. Dina Titus, D-Nev.

Titus said the public comment period “should not be seen, however, as a substitute for a consensus-based siting process.”

“Washington wants to hear from Nevadans, and I encourage all of my constituents to make their voices heard through the public comment

opportunity and let those in Washington know what we already do: Yucca Mountain is dead,” said Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev.

The federal government is responsible for disposal of nuclear waste and is being challenged in courts for failing to carry out its obligation.

A report made public last week by the nonpartisan Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress, found that restarting the process would take \$330 million and up to five years to complete.

The GAO report also noted that after the Department of Energy withdrew its licensing application, it dismantled the Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management, which was established to oversee Yucca Mountain.

The GAO said it could take the department years to recruit and train the proper mix of scientists and engineers to manage the program. To restart licensing, the GAO said, the department would need to rebuild its staff to defend the application.

The House Energy and Commerce Committee is writing legislation to jumpstart the development of Yucca Mountain.

Two key lawmakers on that committee said last week that while the GAO report cited challenges, the document could serve as a road map to completion of the licensing process and give Nevada stakeholders a chance to raise their concerns before the commission.

Nye County, where the Yucca Mountain site is located, favors completion of the process to determine whether the Nevada location is a viable place to store nuclear waste.

But Nevada, Las Vegas and a majority of the state’s congressional delegation oppose permanent storage of nuclear waste in the state.

Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev., said Yucca Mountain would put the health of Nevadans and the state’s economy at risk.

The DOE had spent \$15 billion on developing Yucca Mountain until the licensing process stopped. The GAO said the cost to continue the licensing process would be roughly \$330 million, based on commission estimates.

The state has filed more than 220 “contentions,” or challenges, to Yucca Mountain. There are more than 300 challenges, which would have to be litigated before the commission as part of the licensing process.

Bob Halstead, the head of the Nevada Agency for Nuclear Projects, said the cost to complete the licensing would be closer to \$2 billion.

Overall, Heller said, the cost to license, develop, operate and finally dismantle Yucca Mountain would cost an additional \$82 billion beyond the \$15 billion already spent on a site that faces stiff opposition.

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