

Pahrump Valley Times

Posted June 23, 2017 - 7:02am at: <http://pvtimes.com/news/energy-secretary-s-yucca-comments-irk-nevada-s-leaders-please-nye-county#sthash.oQGH5lq6.EhelCnSP.dpbs>

Energy secretary's Yucca comments irk Nevada's leaders, please Nye County

By Daria Sokolova Pahrump Valley Times

U.S. Energy Secretary Rick Perry said the nation has a “moral obligation” to build Yucca Mountain in Nye County.

Perry appeared in front of the House Appropriations Energy and Water Subcommittee on Tuesday, when members of Congress discussed the fiscal year 2018 budget request for the Department of Energy.

“We have a moral and national security obligation to come up with a long-term solution, finding the safest repositories available,” Perry told the subcommittee. “Listen, I understand, this is a politically-sensitive topic for some, but we can no longer kick the can down the road.”

The Trump administration is seeking \$120 million in the 2018 fiscal year for the Energy Department to restart the licensing proceeding for the stalled Yucca Mountain, an idea that is widely opposed by most Nevada officials.

The subcommittee's chairman, U.S. Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, said the Obama administration made “the costly and wrong decision” to abandon the Yucca Mountain licensing application.

Approximately 120 sites in 39 states hold spent nuclear fuel and high-level radioactive waste. Nevada is not one of them.

In response to Simpson's question, Perry described his plans to move forward with Yucca Mountain.

Perry said it's important for Congress to be a part of the solution because, “It's your citizens that have the most to lose if we continue to leave this waste in your districts,” he told Simpson.

Perry also mentioned his late-March visit to Yucca Mountain.

“The first trip I took as a secretary, was to come to Nevada to see that facility, to talk to the men and women that have been working on it for in some cases decades, and recognize that it is the proper place for long-term storage for us to do our duty, to follow the law, to put a plan into place,” he said.

Nevada reacts

During his testimony, Perry also suggested using the Nevada National Security Site as an interim storage location for high-level nuclear waste, a statement that quickly drew scorn from Nevada officials.

Perry said he believes interim storage should be done as officials are working toward “standing Yucca Mountain back up,” getting it operational and following the law.

“I think it’s so important to have the discussion with the members of Congress, so that they can share with their constituents why this is so important that we move as much of this waste, whether it’s transuranic waste or high-level waste out of their districts either in the interim or in the case of the Yucca Mountain permanent storage site,” Perry said.

The Las Vegas Review-Journal on Wednesday reported that after Perry’s comments about an interim storage created a firestorm, he said that no decisions have been made on temporary sites for spent fuel storage in Texas, New Mexico or Nevada.

“I think it is appropriate to say, there are no plans at this particular time for interim storage in New Mexico, Nevada or Texas or any other site,” Perry told a Senate subcommittee on Wednesday.

Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval said Perry’s comments on Tuesday came “as a complete blindside,” and added that he views it as “a total disregard and failure to honor the historical process.”

“The idea of storing high-level nuclear waste at the National Security Site is ill-conceived, irresponsible, and likely illegal,” Sandoval said in a statement. “This is a prime example of federal overreach and Nevada will pursue every legal option at our disposal.”

Sandoval also said that he asked Nevada Attorney General Adam Laxalt to review the “misguided proposal” and identify legal avenues to stop it.

“This is further than even the most fervent pro-Yucca advocates have gone and like Yucca Mountain, this idea is a non-starter,” Sandoval said about Perry’s proposal. “Let me be clear, no part of Nevada will be home to the world’s most toxic waste and we will fight every effort that puts our citizens at risk.”

U.S. Rep. Ruben Kihuen, D-North Las Vegas, whose district includes Yucca Mountain, called Perry's comments "the height of irresponsibility."

The federal government has tried for years to force Nevada to serve as the dumping ground for the rest of the country's nuclear waste without success," Kihuen said in a statement. "This is another poor attempt by an administration hell-bent on ignoring one simple fact – Nevadans do not support the dumping of nuclear waste in our state."

U.S. Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nevada, urged Perry to heed the advice of scientists who have deemed Yucca Mountain "unviable and dangerous for nuclear waste storage."

"Until then, I am prepared to do whatever I can to stop ill-conceived proposals from advancing," Cortez Masto said.

More challenges ahead

Perry's comments, however, drew a different reaction from proponents of the project, particularly in Nye County, where officials support the restart of the Yucca Mountain licensing proceeding.

Arnold Knightly, Nye County spokesman, said keeping waste scattered around the country is "a national security risk."

"The licensing process needs to be funded and move forward for Yucca Mountain, one of the most studied geological sites in the country," Knightly said in a statement. "Only when the science is vetted will the people of Nye County, the state of Nevada and the nation know if Yucca will be a safe repository."

Nevada State Sen. Pete Goicoechea, R-Eureka, said previously that he would like to see part of the former Nevada Test Site used as an interim storage site for nuclear waste.

Bob Halstead, executive director of the Nevada Agency for Nuclear Projects, said Perry's proposal to store nuclear waste at the Nevada National Security Site is prohibited under current the Nuclear Waste Policy Act's section titled "Limitation."

The section states that "no monitored retrievable storage facility may be constructed in the state of Nevada."

Other developments

Meanwhile, the Nuclear Waste Policy Amendments Act of 2017, proposed by U.S. Rep. John Shimkus, R-Illinois, the main proponent of Yucca Mountain in Congress, seeks to

eliminate the prohibition of an interim storage facility in the state of Nevada from the Nuclear Waste Policy Act.

Shimkus' draft legislature came out as a result of multiple hearings held last year on the matter of nuclear waste that has been piling up at nuclear reactors across the country. The measure has been widely regarded by Nevada officials as an attempt to bring Yucca Mountain back to life.

Shimkus' spokesman Jordan Haverly said the bill would allow for an interim storage facility to be constructed in Nevada.

"From the congressman's perspective, the provision provides another option for the state to engage," Haverly said in an email. "Hosting an interim site could potentially provide more jobs and would make sense for DOE in terms of minimizing costs."

The U.S. House of Representatives Energy and Commerce Committee's environment subcommittee held a hearing on the bill in April. Haverly said the next steps for the bill are introduction and a full committee mark-up.

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