

Trump triggers fight over Yucca waste site

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Supporters and opponents of the proposed Yucca Mountain nuclear waste site in Nevada are ramping up their advocacy efforts in hopes of swaying Congress and the Trump administration.

For the first time in at least seven years, the proposed repository for high-level nuclear waste is on the political agenda in Washington, D.C., and lobbyists are dusting off their playbooks to once again advocate for or against the site.

President Trump sought \$120 million in his budget proposal for fiscal 2018 to restart the licensing process for Yucca, and Energy Secretary Rick Perry has become a vocal defender of the project.

Meanwhile, the House is moving bipartisan legislation to mandate that the planning process restart and is considering funding for federal agencies to do so.

The flurry of activity on Yucca is a major shift from the last administration. President Obama and his staff opposed Yucca, shut down the licensing process and advocated for a “consent-based” siting process for a repository, in which a site would be selected only if the local community wanted it there.

Now that Obama and former Nevada Sen. Harry Reid (D), a vocal Yucca opponent, are out of office, Yucca is making a comeback.

That’s good news for the nuclear power industry, which welcomes the opportunity to move forward on the project.

“What we’re optimistic about is that we’ve got an administration that wants to solve the problem and is willing to find a workable means to do so,” said Baker Elmore, director of federal programs at the Nuclear Energy Institute.

Opponents of the Yucca project are also gearing up to fight, whether in Congress, within the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) licensing process or elsewhere.

“The environmentalists are staying in this. It’s too important of an issue. It lasts for a million years,” said Geoff Fettus, a senior attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council.

His group supports establishing a federal geologic repository for nuclear waste but opposes Yucca due to Nevada’s opposition, the federal environmental exemptions given to the project and other factors.

Nevada leaders and the gambling industry are also fighting Yucca, arguing that it would be dangerous and reduce tourism to Las Vegas and the rest of the state.

Congress first mandated a nuclear waste repository in 1982, and the federal government considered numerous sites.

But in 1987, Congress picked Yucca, in legislation opponents refer to as the “Screw Nevada Bill.” The site was due to be operational by 1998 but has faced numerous roadblocks since then.

In 2008, under President George W. Bush, the Energy Department submitted an application for Yucca to the NRC.

Obama stopped the NRC consideration and the Energy Department’s defense of the application in 2010. The NRC was later ordered by a court to continue its consideration, and largely cleared the proposal on safety and environmental grounds.

In recent years, Obama and Reid successfully stopped any action on Yucca — but now Donald Trump is the president and Republicans control both chambers of Congress.

“It certainly has momentum,” said John Tuman, chairman of the political science department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. “Harry Reid’s departure from the Senate, as well as Republicans unifying control over both houses of Congress and the executive branch, has changed the reality on the ground.”

The nuclear industry started late last year lobbying lawmakers on both the House Energy and Commerce Committee's legislation to move forward on Yucca and an interim nuclear waste site, and on appropriating the funding needed by federal agencies to continue licensing.

"We went in and tried to educate people on where the fuel is, why it's stranded, but an overall educational effort to help people understand the used fuel situation in the United States," Elmore said. "We've got more of that to do as we get down this road."

The industry got help from the National Association of Regulatory Utility Commissioners (NARUC). That group's arguments have centered in part on the impact to electricity customers, who had paid fees for the repository for years.

"NARUC has, for years, been at the forefront advocating for Congress to use the funds collected from ratepayers in the Nuclear Waste Fund to complete a permanent repository and start accepting civilian waste," said James Bradford Ramsay, the group's general counsel.

A nuclear industry lobbyist said their focus would be on the getting the House bill enacted and on appropriating the money that is needed to get Yucca started.

"The imperative will be on educating members about the history of the program, the government's commitment, the fact that it's fundamentally different from other programs in that there is a contractual commitment," the lobbyist said.

But environmentalists say they're ready for the Yucca fight as well.

"There are a lot of people who have been committed to fighting Yucca for a very long time. And I think that people are beginning to organize and get together and figure out, during these very difficult times when there are so many environmental issues that are pressing, to add Yucca Mountain to mix," said Wenonah Hauter, executive director of Food and Water Watch.

Greens are joined in their fight by the state of Nevada and the gambling industry. The Las Vegas Strip is only 90 miles from Yucca, and casino operators worry that the waste transported to the repository could travel near the strip.

Nevada last week approved a \$150,000 boost to a contract the state has with Adams Natural Resources Consulting Services to fight Yucca, bringing the total for the contract to \$450,000.

“I feel like it is a disgusting waste of money and resources on the part of the federal government,” Gov. Brian Sandoval (R) said of the project, according to the Las Vegas Review-Journal.

Casino operators, many of whom supported Trump in last year’s election, are ramping up their fight as well.

The American Gaming Association (AGA) is worried that Yucca would reduce tourism to Las Vegas.

“The AGA stands with the many concerned citizens, small business operators and bipartisan members of Congress in staunch opposition to any attempt to restart the repository licensing process at Yucca Mountain,” Chris Cylke, vice president of government affairs at the gaming group, said in a statement.

“We will continue to monitor the situation on Capitol Hill and look for a more feasible solution that ensures radioactive waste is never stored anywhere near the world’s premier tourist, convention and entertainment destination.”