

Q+A:

State's chief Yucca critic: It's 'almost a religious controversy now'

By [Yvonne Gonzalez \(contact\)](#)

Tuesday, Sept. 5, 2017 | 2 a.m.

The once-mothballed proposal for a Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository looks to be heading for a revival and will be a part of discussions at this week's Radwaste Summit in Las Vegas.



Robert J. Halstead, executive director of the governor's Agency for Nuclear Projects, is set to appear on the "Yucca Mountain Restart" panel on Wednesday at the summit, which is expected to draw more than 350 commercial and federal radioactive waste officials from Sept. 5-7.

The 11th annual summit is taking place shortly after the Nuclear Regulatory Commission decided in early August to spend up to \$110,000 gathering information for its review of the Department of Energy's stalled Yucca Mountain application. President Donald Trump's blueprint budget released earlier this year asked for \$120 million for Yucca Mountain.

The singular focus on the Nye County site came about in the '80s with an amendment to the Nuclear Waste Policy Act. Nevada has always been opposed to Yucca Mountain serving as the nation's sole site for nuclear waste storage, Halstead said.

Nye County Commission Chair Dan Schinhofen will also speak on the panel. Officials in the county have said they want the licensing proceeding to move forward so that the science behind the project can be heard.

Halstead spoke with the Las Vegas Sun about the panel and the uncertain future of Yucca Mountain.

What's the goal of the "Yucca Mountain Restart" panel?

I'd like people to take away an understanding that Nevada's opposition to Yucca Mountain is very deep and strong, aside from folks in Nye County (and some others). In Gov. (Brian) Sandoval's State of the State in January, he promised relentless opposition and maximum resources.

I hope to explain the ways in which the state's opposition is based on concerns about safety and protection of the environment. Nevada's opposition is based on a detailed understanding of the deficiencies in the site of Yucca Mountain. It should never have been chosen as a repository site, if we were working on earth science rather than political science.

The Department of Energy's ... repository design does not overcome the deficiencies at the repository site. (Nevada's) opposition is based on a real understanding of the earth science and a real understanding of the engineering and operating issues that are involved with DOE's proposal. A lot of people have a mushy idea in their

head that, "Oh, everything that's wrong with Yucca Mountain could be fixed, and why won't the state just sit down and talk about fixing it." That isn't the case.

Geologic disposal means that the site is supposed to work without engineered barriers. The geology and the hydrology are supposed to isolate the waste. That is absolutely not the case at Yucca Mountain. Even DOE is forced to admit that without engineered barriers the site will fail in less than 1,000 years, let alone the million-year standard that it has to meet.

I want to have people leave that presentation knowing that not only is the state opposed, but the state is opposed for technical reasons. We're going to win on those issues in the licensing proceeding, if in fact Congress decides to restart all of this.

What's next for Yucca Mountain?

No one knows at this point. We won't know (in early September) what's going to happen with the congressional appropriations process. Presumably both agencies under the Trump administration's March directive to restart the program are doing that. But they really can't do very much unless they get massive new funding — \$120 million requested for DOE, \$30 million requested for NRC for the federal fiscal year that begins on Oct. 1.

The state is preparing for a worst-case scenario on the policy front ... that DOE restarts their Yucca program, which has been dormant really since 2011. (Energy Secretary) Rick Perry has said the DOE intends to go forward with the Yucca licensing proceeding depending on whether Congress gives them the money. The state is preparing for a full resumption of the licensing proceeding, even though we think that's a terrible mistake in terms of what's good for Nevada ... (and) the country.

Will Yucca Mountain supporters outnumber opponents at the RadWaste summit?

It's rare that you get this many pro-nuclear waste, pro-Yucca Mountain people in one place at one time. It's always interesting to go and talk to people ... This conference is going to be filled with people who think Yucca Mountain is a good idea. I don't know that I'm going to change anybody's mind, because this is almost a religious controversy now.

The overwhelming majority of people at this conference are people who think Yucca Mountain going forward is a good idea.

What are the key topics on the RadWaste Summit agenda?

The three hot topics are going to be Yucca Mountain, what to do about spent nuclear fuel and high-level waste until Yucca Mountain is ready — or if Yucca Mountain isn't ready ever — and then ... cleanup at DOE weapons facilities.

I try to spend a lot of time at the beginning of my presentations these days explaining to people, "Guys, there's no repository there." The tunnel cannot be used for storage or disposal. Even if the existing tunnel were to be worked into the design of a repository — it's 5 miles long — you need a minimum of 40 miles of tunnels and drifts (another type of tunnel) and probably closer to 90 miles.

A repository at Yucca Mountain is at least \$82 billion (on top of the \$15 billion already spent) and 20 or 25 years away.

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...w that "Nevada will get BILLIONS of dollars to do this; here will NEVER be a federal bribe to take this future, will simply shove it down our throats, just as Putin ite. But it's on US; If we here in the Silver state cannot ve to become the nation's nuclear dumpster.



Atoms4Peace1 → Diamond Mike • 10 hours ago

Antinuclear zealots have always argued ideology. The real science is sound much to their dismay. They are just fearful people will realize nothing is permanent unless they burn actinides in reactors. Its gold people. Use its energy content and end the charade.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



Not Even Human • a day ago

I feel like, at some point, Trump will do everything he can to force this on Nevada. Because Nevada voted for Hillary Clinton and he just can't let that go. We need to be punched in the gut for that, because that's how he works.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Diamond Mike → Not Even Human • a day ago

Also his irrational Obamaphobia, by which he has to try to undo everything touched by the black man who dared crash the Whites-only House.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



360dunk • a day ago

Those of you with a conscience - don't be swayed by Nye County Commission Chair Dan Schinhofen's stance. He's indicated in the past that the Yucca project will help Nye's economy by bringing in federal dollars. Do you really want to compromise the safety of future generations in order to cash in today? Can anyone guarantee in the next million years that there won't be any groundwater contamination, natural disasters, site accidents, sabotage, or theft that could devastate the nearby metropolitan region? Find a safer and less populous part of the country to store this nuclear waste.

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Nevada chairman. Heller is the president's buddy.

Shouldn't they be able to use their "power" to stop this? Look what happened when Nevada trusted the federal government when it conducted above-ground tests. The waste should be stored where it's generated - no risks then of transporting it. We have no nuclear plants. The area being investigated is seismically and volcanically active in geologic terms - it's a horrible location.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Daniel A. Erskine • a day ago

The simple fact is. The storage of nuclear waste at yucca Mt. will be safe.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



john smith → Daniel A. Erskine • a day ago

That is not a fact.

3 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



Atoms4Peace1 → john smith • 10 hours ago

Yes it is.

^ | v • Reply • Share >



gil knappmiller → Daniel A. Erskine • 21 hours ago

--exactly--but the anti's , indeed have made opposition a false "religion" with too many followers---

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



big fatty → Daniel A. Erskine • 21 hours ago

What are your facts on decay from INSIDE a container ? If only one of them ever suffers a breach , they will all breach . Then what ?

^ | v • Reply • Share >



William Tell → big fatty • 20 hours ago

Lay off the bong, fatty. You're not making sense.....

^ | v • Reply • Share >



big fatty → William Tell • 20 hours ago

ts , let's hear them . If you're just a troll , go eat another poisonous apples , Billy .

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big fatty • 15 hours ago

want to know fatty? Some characteristics of the alloy 22 s? Details of the canisters that will either contain spent l reactor fuel, or the glass matrix poured at Savannah ne Hanford site? lol.....

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big fatty → William Tell • 15 hours ago

Is this Alloy 22 a cobalt based stainless steel ? How do the welds react with the zirconium ? Welds are not even airtight , let alone radioactive proof . What has been done to keep exterior water from corroding those same welds releasing the contents to heat other caskets , degrading the welds and the base castings ? Are any fasteners part of the caskets ? Acting like you know something isn't the same as real world knowledge . What else you got ? What's the interior temperature of a sealed casket ? What temperature does the base metal of the casket start to become plastic ? The welds ?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Daniel A. Erskine → big fatty • 10 hours ago

Trying the ole...You don't know everything so you don't know anything tactic I see.

Solid waste encased in stainless steel buried 1000 feed below the surface, in one of the driest environment in the nation. Very low possibility of corrosion and almost no possibility of leakage.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



big fatty → Daniel A. Erskine • 3 hours ago

Except I know that nickel X is extremely prone to cracking , especially where it's been welded . And the heat factor is its weakness . No one has been able to tell me the internal temperature of the caskets once they're buried . This is not one bit safe . Ever seen used combustor parts from a jet engine made from this stuff ? All the studies done were from external elements . Where's the study from decay inside the casket ?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›



William Tell • a day ago

Bob will have a tough sell.

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