

Yucca Mountain not in the "top 10" sites for a repository, Nevada expert says

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There is no repository at Yucca Mountain.

Yucca Mountain is an unsuitable site for a nuclear waste repository.

Nevada was a victim of "power politics" when Yucca Mountain was selected as the proposed site for the nation's nuclear waste.

Those were the main themes Tuesday night during "Yucca Mountain 101," a Sierra Nevada Forums' presentation at the Brewery Arts Center's Performance Hall.

Robert Halstead, executive director of the Nevada Agency for Nuclear Projects, and Marta Adams, Nevada special deputy attorney general, who represents the state AG's office and the Agency for Nuclear Projects in the effort to block Yucca Mountain, addressed a crowd of more than 50 people.

Their presentation focused on the history of Yucca Mountain, the current status of the project and legal challenges to it, and possible developments in the near future.

Halstead, who has worked for the state since 1988 in its efforts to prevent a high-level nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain, opened the forum.

"It's because I know what's wrong with Yucca Mountain that I can say to you tonight that Yucca Mountain is not the answer," he said.

He and Adams emphatically stated there is no repository; rather, there is a five-mile "horseshoe-shaped" tunnel. A repository, as currently planned, would require the additional boring of more than 40 miles of tunnels.

Halstead also addressed how Yucca Mountain came to be the lone site under consideration for the national repository in the 1980s, as powerful members of Congress eliminated their states from consideration.

"Yucca Mountain was chosen on the basis of political science and not earth sciences," he said. "Nevada simply had no clout."

In 1987, Adams said, the question regarding Yucca Mountain changed from is it safe? to, "How do we make it work despite the flaws of the site?"

Adams addressed how Nevada has challenged the selection in court and will continue to challenge it if the licensing process is restarted.

"We've never really stopped preparing for this," Adams said, though the process was essentially halted in 2010.

There are five pending cases challenging various aspects of the project, Adams said, and the state has a list of more than 200 "contentions," or challenges, to the process and is ready to add up to 50 more if the licensing process restarts.

Adams said the licensing process alone could take up to five years and cost between \$40 million (the state of Nevada's estimate) and \$1.66 billion (the U.S. Department of Energy's estimate).

The audience submitted questions for Halstead and Adams. Several were addressed during the presentation but one that started a lengthy discussion concerned the economic benefits Nevada might accrue if the repository is opened.

Halstead and Adams — needless to say, opponents of the project — pointed out much of the possible benefit depends on continued federal funding.

"What one Congress says is an economic commitment is not necessarily adhered to by another Congress," Adams said.

Halstead was more pointed.

"If you talk about the economic benefits before you do a safety evaluation, you bias the safety evaluation," he said, adding, "It's hard to require the federal government to live up to any kind of agreement."

In what amounted to a closing statement, Halstead addressed his work for the state of Wisconsin in the 1970s and 1980s when it was being considered for a potential repository site — work, he said, that played a role in Yucca Mountain being selected but also provided him a wider view of the issue.

"I would argue Yucca Mountain is not the worst site," he said. "But it would not be in my top 10."

Sierra Nevada Forums is considering a second forum on the topic, but neither a focus nor a date has been determined.