

House passes bill to revive Yucca Mountain licensing

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WASHINGTON — Howls of protests by Nevada's bipartisan congressional delegation were drowned out Thursday when the House voted overwhelmingly to pass a bill that would revive the licensing process on the Department of Energy's application to open Yucca Mountain.

Republicans and Democrats voted to move forward with the process to develop the Nevada site as the nation's permanent repository for nuclear waste from power plants produced in 39 other states.

The House voted 340-72 to approve the Nuclear Waste Policy Amendments Act of 2017, written by Rep. John Shimkus, R-Ill., who has sought to put the licensing of Yucca Mountain back on track after the Obama administration cut funding for the project in 2011.

Nevada's entire congressional delegation, Reps. Dina Titus, Jacky Rosen and Ruben Kihuen, all Las Vegas-area Democrats, and Republican Mark Amodei of Carson City, voted against the bill.

Despite passage in the House, the Senate remains a hurdle for the legislation.

Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev., has threatened to put a hold on the House bill and Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev., a former state attorney general, have vowed to halt the process in the Senate.

Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., plans to introduce legislation later this year that would emphasize interim storage of existing nuclear waste until permanent repositories like Yucca Mountain can be opened. Alexander has acknowledged political opposition in Nevada as an obstacle.

Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval has pledged to spend state resources to fight the development of Yucca Mountain.

But rural Nevada counties, including Nye County where Yucca Mountain is located, support the licensing process to determine whether the site would be safe for storage of nuclear waste.

Shimkus said Yucca Mountain would provide high-paying federal jobs that would diversify the state's economy, while solving the national problem of growing stockpiles of nuclear waste that are building up at civilian power plants.

Business leaders, conservation groups and the gaming industry in Las Vegas are concerned transporting nuclear waste and storing it 90 miles northwest of town could damage the state's hospitality and entertainment industry.

Congress in 1987 designated Yucca Mountain as the nation's nuclear waste repository. The federal government spent \$15 billion to study, research and drill a tunnel in the mountain.

The DOE applied to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission for a construction permit and hearings on that application were underway when the Obama administration cut funding and halted the proceedings in 2011.

President Donald Trump sought to revive the process and included \$120 million to continue licensing hearings in his fiscal year 2018 budget. Although the House approved the funding, the Senate did not.

Trump again proposed funding for licensing in the budget for fiscal year 2019, which begins Oct. 1.

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