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EDITORIAL

Follow the Science on Yucca

The administration's budget for the Energy Department raises a disturbing question. Is President Obama, who has pledged to restore science to its rightful place in decision making, now prepared to curtail the scientific analyses needed to determine whether a proposed nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain in Nevada would be safe to build?

It is no secret that the president and the Senate majority leader, Harry Reid, who hails from Nevada, want to close down the Yucca Mountain project, which excites intense opposition in the state. The administration has proposed a budget for fiscal year 2010 that would eliminate all money for further development of the site, and Mr. Reid has pronounced the project dead.

But the administration at least claimed that it would supply enough money for the Energy Department to complete the process of seeking a license from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, if only to gain useful knowledge about nuclear waste disposal. Unfortunately, the budget released this month looks as if it will fall well short of the amount needed.

Money for the Yucca Mountain project, nearly all of which is used to support the licensing application, would fall from \$288.4 million in 2009, the current year, to \$196.8 million in 2010, a precipitous drop. And the agency intends to rely heavily on its own staff personnel rather than on more costly outside consultants from the national laboratories or private contractors. There is great danger that the department will lack the expertise needed to answer tough technical questions that emerge during the regulatory commission's reviews.

These ramp-downs are occurring at the worst time. The regulatory commission is just beginning its licensing process, which is scheduled to take three to four years, and its relevant boards have ruled that at least eight intervenors can raise some 300 issues for technical challenges, an unusually high number. The cutbacks increase the odds that the agency will stumble in trying to justify a license — or that the hearings and evaluations won't be completed within statutory deadlines.

Meanwhile, the administration, Congressional leaders and the nuclear industry are calling

for a blue-ribbon panel to study alternative ways to dispose of nuclear waste. Surely it would be useful for any such panel to know whether the Yucca Mountain project was sound or flawed.

Before approving this truncated budget, Congress needs to ensure that it contains enough money to sustain a genuine licensing effort. We have no idea whether Yucca Mountain would be a suitable burial ground for nuclear wastes. But after the government has labored for more than two decades and spent almost \$10 billion to get the site ready for licensing hearings, it would be foolish not to complete the process with a good-faith evaluation. Are Mr. Obama and Mr. Reid afraid of what the science might tell them?

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