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Yucca Mountain seen as possible reprocessing site

Nuclear waste still up in air

By BENJAMIN SPILLMAN
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A devastating blow last week to a plan to bury nuclear waste under Yucca Mountain has bolstered another controversial idea: reprocessing nuclear waste at the same location on the Nevada Test Site.

Several Republican candidates -- including leading U.S. Senate candidates Danny Tarkanian, Sue Lowden and Sharron Angle -- have expressed support for studying or experimenting with reprocessing, a method of extracting useful fuel from radioactive waste.

Two Republican gubernatorial candidates are also open to the idea, despite steadfast opposition from the Nevada political establishment that stymied the plan to store waste at Yucca Mountain.

The opposition lineup includes Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., the highest-ranking politician to ever come from the state who counts keeping dangerous radioactive waste out of Nevada among his foremost accomplishments.

Of Yucca Mountain Reid said, "We should be able to use it for something ... other than nuclear waste."

Even as Reid and other incumbents celebrated three recent bureaucratic maneuvers they say killed the nuclear storage plan once and for all, reprocessing advocates stuck to their guns. For them, the fear of radioactive accidents is offset by hope for high-paid, high-tech jobs.

The prospect of bringing new jobs and technology to Nevada is how Republican proponents seeking office approach the issue.

"I am still in favor of the jobs, the technology and the brilliant people it (reprocessing) would bring to Nevada," said former North Las Vegas Mayor Mike Montandon, one of three Republican gubernatorial candidates.

"If the safety precautions are there, we should do it," said Tarkanian, who put reprocessing first on his list of five ideas to diversify Nevada's economy.

"That is a controversial proposal. Harry Reid is against it, and Sue Lowden is against it," Tarkanian said, even though Lowden has said, "I think we could explore reprocessing."

Tarkanian also has said he supports reprocessing "just like they do in France," although French-style systems are not considered feasible or desirable for the United States.

U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission Chairman Gregory Jaczko was quoted Tuesday in the Arizona

Republic criticizing French-style reprocessing.

"One of the best developed myths out there is that France has solved the waste problem," said Jaczko, citing the fact the country still must dispose of waste and that it also has just 58 reactors at 19 sites, compared with the 104 reactors in the United States.

Angle said Nevada should "make lemonade out of lemons" and consider turning Yucca Mountain into a reprocessing facility instead of a nuclear waste repository to spur the economy and create jobs.

"We need to decide if this has potential and is good for Nevada or if it's as bad as Harry Reid says it is," Angle said while campaigning this past weekend in Virginia City.

Dan Burns, spokesman for Gov. Jim Gibbons, said Gibbons "may support such an idea," adding it would be "extremely premature" to take a firm stance for or against reprocessing.

GOP gubernatorial front-runner Brian Sandoval "fought the federal government in court over Yucca Mountain as attorney general. He opposed it then, and he opposes it now," spokeswoman Mary-Sarah Kinner said.

"He would be very careful with this until we know more," she said, adding that Nevada must begin to develop innovative ideas for how to utilize the site, including as a location for advanced renewable energy research.

THE CONCERNS

Opponents of reprocessing say the notion of bringing in good jobs is a mirage.

The real consequences of reprocessing in Nevada, they said, would be dangerous material moving through communities and radioactive waste piling up at Yucca Mountain, something Nevadans already have said they don't want.

"My first reaction is I can't see why we'd want to jump out of the frying pan and into the fire. It still leaves a waste stream to deal with that is highly toxic," said former Sen. Richard Bryan, a leading supporter of efforts by Reid and others to kill the plan to use Yucca Mountain as a storage facility.

Critics of reprocessing say it is risky, prohibitively expensive and unnecessary.

"Reprocessing spent fuel is a terrible idea on many different levels," said Edwin Lyman, senior scientist for the Union of Concerned Scientists, a nonprofit advocacy group that examines environmental and security issues. "Our biggest concern is it poses the threat of nuclear terrorism."

A fact sheet from the group says current reprocessing methods separate radioactive plutonium and store it in a concentrated, powdered form. Commercial scale reprocessing, as practiced in France and elsewhere, generates so much material it is difficult to track and secure.

The group argues that widespread reprocessing in the United States under this method would add enough "separated and vulnerable plutonium" to make 40,000 nuclear weapons.

"We think there has been too much money already wasted on reprocessing technologies that are not effective," Lyman said.

Reid also opposes reprocessing on the grounds it would involve transporting waste through Nevada communities and requires a nonsustainable supply of water.

David Cherry, spokesman for Rep. Shelley Berkley, D-Nev., said Berkley's answer is "hell no" to the notion of using Yucca Mountain to reprocess nuclear waste.

And when asked whether Democratic gubernatorial candidate Rory Reid would favor or oppose reprocessing at Yucca Mountain, his spokesman Mike Trask replied: "Against."

Future options for the site range from filling in the tunnels and returning it to a predisturbed state to a range of possibilities suggested by Reid. His list includes national security, energy research and uses that "do not involve storing spent nuclear fuel or nuclear waste."

Rep. Dina Titus, D-Las Vegas, an opponent of nuclear waste storage at Yucca Mountain, said she would consider alternative uses. Her spokesman, Andrew Stoddard, said Titus "is open to the idea of doing research and testing on nuclear fuel reprocessing technology as long as it does not require hazardous material to be shipped into Nevada."

Even some dyed-in-the-wool Republicans say it's a stretch to suggest Yucca Mountain could provide an answer to the state's current economic woes.

The prospect of new jobs sounds good in candidate stump speeches, said former Nevada Gov. Robert List, an energy consultant who backed Yucca Mountain as a nuclear storage site. But they won't come from reprocessing anytime soon.

"I don't see it as something that would necessarily be an immediate boost to our economy," List said. "Congress would have to fund a program. We'd have to set a national policy. That alone takes years to evolve. But I do think it is an interesting opportunity."

'A LIGHTNING ROD'

Nevada's highly charged political atmosphere combined with the complex nature of reprocessing nuclear fuel makes it difficult for the public to discuss the merits and drawbacks of engaging in the practice at Yucca Mountain in an open and sincere manner, said Michael Voegele, a former chief scientist for the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste project.

"The answers are as hard as the questions," Voegele said. "Yucca Mountain is a lightning rod."

Still, proponents say new technology could make reprocessing safer and more cost effective.

Voegele said there is evidence to suggest new technology could result in reactors that use much less water and can recycle fuel over and over in a closed loop, which reduces storage and security risks.

But it will take larger experiments to determine whether the technology would work on a commercially viable scale.

"We need to start scaling those processes up," he said.

But the opposition has caused consternation outside Nevada among those who see a contradiction in the views of people who say they support cleaner, less carbon intense energy but throw up hurdles to the development of nuclear power or reprocessing research.

For example, although the administration of President Barack Obama has said nuclear power may well play a role in America's energy future, the Department of Energy on June 29 ceased preparation for a nuclear recycling program under the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., noted that Obama's budget cut funding for waste storage at Yucca Mountain as the Energy Department was forming a blue ribbon commission to study management of nuclear waste.

"It's really an insult to one's intelligence when you take (Yucca) and recycling off the table, and then try to create the impression you're serious about nuclear as a viable option," McCain was quoted as saying in the Feb. 1 Wall Street Journal. "If they don't consider (Yucca), then their recommendations will lack significant credibility."

John Timmer, who writes for the online technology publication Ars Technica, said killing off the idea of storing nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain and the controversy surrounding reprocessing only adds to the unstable political atmosphere regarding the nation's nuclear future.

Timmer wrote an article titled "After Yucca Mountain: How to Store U.S. Nuclear Waste."

He wrote politics and economics suggest long-term underground storage is the most likely solution. But Yucca Mountain is no longer on the table and regional storage facilities could be just as politically problematic as Yucca was.

"Politically, clearly, nobody wants to have it happen near them," Timmer said.

That leaves waste stored around the country at reactor sites and no solution at hand.

"Generating the political will to commit to a single or limited number of storage facilities is going to be a huge, huge challenge," Timmer said.

Contact reporter Benjamin Spillman at bspillman@reviewjournal.com or 702-477-3861.

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