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Yucca Project's Last 600 Employees Scramble for New Jobs

By EMILY YEHLE of [Greenwire](#)

Two years ago, about 2,700 employees worked on the Yucca Mountain project. That number is now about 600 -- and by the end of September, it will be zero.

But Department of Energy officials say its employees, at least, won't be hung out to dry. As DOE rushes to shut down the project, it is trying to find new jobs for those who have worked for years on the now-defunct effort to build a nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain, Nev.

Spokeswoman Jennifer Lee said DOE has been "diligent" in helping the project's federal employees "find new opportunities, including working to help employees find new positions in the department and throughout the federal government through career transition programs."

With two months left before the project's Sept. 30 closure, DOE officials say 30 federal employees have not decided upon retirement or another job. Contracted employees, however, are harder to track; some will continue to work for the contractor, while others will lose their jobs.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) -- a longtime opponent of the Yucca project -- has devoted a page of his Senate website to listing resources for Nevadans who lose their jobs because of the shutdown. Spokesman Tom Brede said a few hundred employees received their notices earlier this year, though federal employees were also offered early retirement, buyouts or other DOE positions.

Still, Brede said keeping the project open would have a "net negative impact" on Las Vegas, which is about 150 miles from Yucca Mountain. Reid instead envisions alternative uses for the Yucca site, he said, and the Government Accountability Office is working on a report of such possibilities.

"Sen. Reid is focusing his energy on making Nevada the leader in developing clean, renewable energy and technology," Brede said in an e-mail. "In addition to creating thousands of good-paying jobs that can never be outsourced, it will diversify Nevada's economy and lead us toward energy independence."

At a House Budget Committee hearing last week, DOE Undersecretary Kristina Johnson said the department now employs about 200 federal employees and 400 contractors. The federal

workers, she said, are given preference for open positions within DOE.

"[W]e have been very diligent about providing resources to help employees," Johnson said, "because we care very much about the individuals that we have worked with to continue their career, or if they choose to separate, to help them in any way we can."

The White House announced plans to close the Yucca site last year, and President Obama zeroed out the project's funding in his fiscal 2011 budget request. But by then, DOE had already downsized the staff as it shifted its focus solely to filing a license application to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission for construction.

In March, DOE filed a motion to withdraw its application. The move has spawned several lawsuits from states and entities hoping to revive the Yucca project, but the department has nevertheless continued to downsize the Yucca staff in preparation for closure.

DOE's plans were laid out in an April affidavit filed in response to the state of Washington's lawsuit against the license withdrawal. DOE officials have offered employees within the Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management preference for DOE positions, voluntary early retirement, relocation allowances and training for job interviews. Encouraging employees to remain within DOE will, according to the affidavit, "facilitate efforts to reconstitute the Yucca Mountain work force, should the need arise."

Some of the contracted employees also are not expected to become unemployed, according to the document. For example, many of the 141 scientists and employees at the DOE-supported national laboratories who work on Yucca projects will probably simply switch to other projects. But 155 additional contracted jobs must be terminated by the end of September to ensure "an orderly closure" of the Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management.

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