

Federal government could oust Yucca Mountain contractor

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The U.S. Dept of Energy is returning to the drawing board on how to improve management of the proposed Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository, located 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas. And that upgrade could entail changing contractors.

The joint venture of Bechtel SAIC, won the five-year, \$3.1 billion site-management contract on Feb. 12, 2001 and that agreement expires in March. Industry sources say the DOE is planning to rebid the contract, adding that competing teams are now beginning to develop.

A Bechtel spokesman says the DOE has not decided whether to renew, but claims that it has met all of its performance requirements. The joint-venture, however, has yet to receive 100 percent of its fee, which was reduced somewhat after a recent evaluation.

But that's typical," the spokesman said. There have been up to 2,000 Bechtel SAIC employees and subcontractors working at the Yucca site.

DOE, meanwhile, has instructed Bechtel SAIC to devise a plan to operate the repository as a non-containment facility. It's a move that would eliminate billions of dollars in construction for handling spent fuel, says Paul Golan, acting director of DOE's office of civilian radioactive waste management. A "simpler" design will make the project "more reliable," he adds.

The repository's two-tiered standard, as outlined by the Environmental Protection Agency, has come under fire by project critics and state officials who claim the proposed rules do not satisfy a court order last July to protect the health and safety of future Nevadans.

"We have said all along the project is not safe and the science is bad, but never thought DOE would actually admit it," said U.S. Senators Harry Reid and John Ensign in an Oct. 25 joint-statement. "[It's a] misguided and fraud-riddled project."

Bechtel SAIC and DOE personnel are both responsible for repository problems, Golan says. That added uncertainty to securing a federal license to operate the facility. "The bottom line is that this new plan gives us simplification in design, licensing and construction," he added.

The Yucca Mountain repository plays a key role in the Bush Administration's National Energy Policy, which is seeking to add 50,000 megawatts of new nuclear generation capacity by 2020. A permanent storage facility solves a long-standing waste problem by consolidating 42,000 metric tons of radioactive plutonium currently stored at 131 places in 39 states.

The previous design called for large handling facilities where fuel would be prepared for storage in the repository. Under the new plan, however, most spent fuel would be sent to the repository in standardized canisters that would not require repetitive handling of fuel.

Failure in project management, contract administration and oversight contributed to project problems, Golan admits. He vows to fix such shortcomings by increasing control of government staffers and contractors, while assuming more authority at DOE headquarters for oversight.

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