

# Requiem for Yucca Mountain

By Bob Loux

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**March 26, 2005 --** Without a miracle of some sort, it is all over. Yucca Mountain, the federal government's choice for storing nuclear waste from Cold War-bomb production and power plants, will never open.



Bob Loux

The project that began with a congressional mandate 22 years ago seems perennially stalled, even though \$8 billion has already been spent on everything from scientific studies and modeling to the building of a railroad deep within Yucca Mountain.

Back in the early 1980s, when Congress selected Nevada as the final resting place for high-level radioactive debris, most Nevadans vehemently opposed the plan. Our resistance, summed up in the frequently seen bumper sticker: "Nevada is not a wasteland," seemed futile to some people. Not any more.

What's changed is, first of all, the science. What began two decades ago as a trickle of evidence suggesting that Yucca Mountain was incapable of isolating deadly radioactive waste has become a deluge.

But instead of acknowledging what its own scientists and research were showing - that the geology of Yucca Mountain was so seriously flawed that the site should be disqualified - the Department of Energy turned the concept of geologic isolation on its head. The agency set about changing rules, regulations and guidelines so as to cover up site deficiencies and permit the program to go forward in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

That was borne out last July, when the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia upheld the state of Nevada's legal challenge to the radiation health-protection standards for the Yucca site. The ruling meant that guaranteeing public safety for 10,000 years wasn't enough; instead, radiation coming from the dump must be safe for as long as 1 million years, the

**expected lifetime of the dump. This will be a difficult feat for both the Environmental Protection Agency and Energy Department, and a license to open Yucca Mountain depends on it.**

**But there have been other signs that Yucca Mountain may be one of the nation's costliest boondoggles:**

**The Energy Department has pushed back Yucca Mountain's opening from 2010 to 2012 to 2015 to 2017, all within a few months.**

**The Bush administration cut Yucca Mountain's 2006 budget in half, to \$651 million. Ted Garrish, Yucca Mountain's acting director, has said that the program will need more than \$1.5 billion a year for the next decade in order to open.**

**The National Association of Regulatory Utility commissioners recently resurrected a proposal to take the nuclear-waste management program away from the Energy Department and turn it over to a quasi-governmental corporation.**

**Some industry representatives now delink the repository at Yucca Mountain from the notion that new power plants can't go forward unless Yucca Mountain goes forward. Previously, the industry insisted that getting Yucca Mountain open was essential for building new reactors.**

**And, a report by the National Commission on Energy Policy calls for interim, aboveground spent-fuel storage as a backup to Yucca Mountain.**

**This is a startling turn of events. As the *Los Angeles Times* put it recently in a news story: "The state has stunned federal officials with its tenacity, legal skill and evolving political acumen, scoring key victories in federal court and in Congress that have repeatedly stalled the project."**

**The U.S. Congress probably chose Yucca Mountain, 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas, as the nation's nuclear dumping ground because it thought Nevada had neither the will nor the clout to fight back. These days we are surprising everyone - and maybe even ourselves.**

**From Democratic Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, Gov. Kenny Guinn, Attorney General Brian Sandoval and Las Vegas Mayor Oscar Goodman, who even promised to lay his body down in front of any truck carrying nuclear waste headed for Yucca Mountain, we've shown our smarts and our power.**

**Now, it is no longer a question of whether Yucca Mountain will crumble, but when. The project is on track to meet the same fate as other major Energy Department projects of the last few decades, such as the super-colliding superconductor and the Clinch River breeder reactor.**

**Despite billions invested, those projects became so weighted down with mismanagement, cost overruns and political opposition that they simply became impossible. So it is with Yucca Mountain.**

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