

Industry push on Yucca Mountain troubles allies

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WASHINGTON — The nuclear industry is adopting a more aggressive stance on Yucca Mountain, a shift that may complicate efforts to reach a compromise on the thorny issue of high-level radioactive waste.

A list of "legislative principles" proposed by the Nuclear Energy Institute is just the latest twist as lawmakers debating nuclear waste policy try to determine a role, if any, for the mothballed Nevada site.

The Energy Daily reported on Friday that the trade group's position has caused a rift with Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., who is the nuclear industry's most influential backer on Capitol Hill and who delivered a pro-industry keynote speech in February at NEI headquarters in Washington D.C.

Alexander's office did not comment on Monday but sources on Capitol Hill confirmed he was not happy. The Energy Daily said Sens. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, and Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., also were taken aback.

Alexander is a key sponsor of legislation to speed a centralized site where nuclear waste could be gathered from nuclear plants scattered around the country, and stored for a few decades at least in above-ground canisters.

But the new NEI legislative principles would bar development of an interim centralized site until after the Nuclear Regulatory Commission issues a final decision whether to license a permanent repository at Yucca Mountain. That could take years, if ever.

Alexander has walked carefully on Yucca-related matters, discouraging Yucca Mountain amendments to his legislation until later. The Tennessee senator reportedly is eyeing a potential compromise with counterparts in the House that would yield a final deal for centralized storage as well as progress on Yucca.

But several recent developments have given some supporters of Yucca Mountain renewed hope that the site can be resurrected after Obama cut off funding in 2010.

The nuclear industry's new stance on Yucca comes on the heels of a series of Nuclear Regulatory Commission technical staff reports that conclude the Nevada site could safely hold nuclear waste for periods up to a million years.

It also comes after Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., the biggest Capitol Hill critic of Yucca Mountain, announced in March he will retire at the end of next year when his term expires. Obama as well will leave office then.

"NEI has done nothing constructive to help solve our country's nuclear waste problem," Reid spokeswoman Kristen Orthman said. "This report is unsurprising but they should recognize that the Yucca Mountain project is dead and not coming back."

"Bottom line is the nuclear energy industry remains committed to working with Congress and the administration to create a sustainable, integrated program for managing the back end of the fuel cycle," NEI spokesman Thomas Kauffman said.

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