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Is Yucca Mountain back on the table?

Obama mothballed the nuclear waste storage project. Now some Republicans seem determined to bring it back out.

Kate Schimel | Aug. 30, 2015 | *Web Exclusive*

This month, a long-debated proposal for a controversial nuclear dumping site took a small step forward.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission released a report examining potential groundwater contamination from burying the toxic remnants of nuclear energy production under Yucca Mountain, in Nevada. The report found that leakage from the site, a desert ridge 100 miles west of Las Vegas, would likely have only small impacts on cancer rates or hereditary diseases in humans and minimal impacts on the downstream environment.

The report was the latest in a series from the NRC and a supplement to the site's original environmental impact statement, first completed in 2002. The first four reports focused on the safety of the site before, during and after construction, and examined the Department of Energy's ability to build the site. In recent months, Republicans, emboldened by the NRC reports and the impending departure of the site's strongest opponent, have been trying to revive the long-dormant project. Yucca funding is shaping up to be a topic of lively debate this fall during the 2016 budgeting process, but it faces considerable obstacles to being approved.

For decades, nuclear waste has been kept in facilities around the country intended only to temporarily store the dangerous and slowly decaying material. Yucca Mountain was supposed to be a more permanent fix: a safe, remote location to bury the waste forever. But since the site was originally designated in 1987, local opposition and wider concerns about the site's safety have grown. President Obama revoked federal backing for the application in 2010, and licensing to develop the site stalled out. Harry Reid, the senior senator from Nevada and a longtime opponent, applauded the move and declared the project effectively dead.



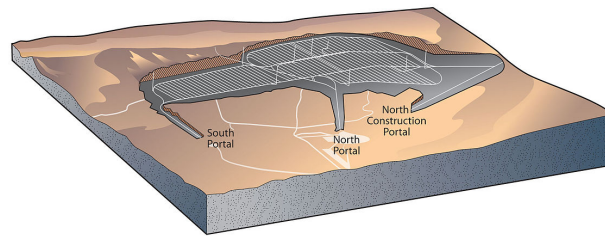
The crest of Yucca Mountain.

Courtesy of U.S. Department of Energy

But it got a boost in 2013 when the U.S. Court of Appeals in D.C. forced the NRC to complete the long-delayed reports on the site's safety. Those reports started coming out shortly after court decision and the technical safety evaluations were completed this spring. They offered mixed statements on the potential safety of the site. Still, their release pushed the project back into the national conversation, and potentially back into play.

Congress faces an Oct. 1 deadline to come up with a national budget. Though it seems likely the two chambers will try and pass a stopgap bill that will keep funding at current levels and give Congress time to negotiate a more long-term budget plan. Yucca could play a role in those budget negotiations; the House 2016 budget bill includes funding for the embattled storage facility and Reid, the project's staunchest opponent, announced plans to retire (<https://www.hcn.org/articles/senate-minority-leader-harry-reid-announces-retirement>) at the end of his term next year. In recent months, House Republicans, led by Rep. John Shimkus from Illinois, successfully pushed to request \$150 million for Yucca licensing.

Although House Republicans are angling for progress on Yucca, that provision is unlikely to make it past the Senate. The Senate budget bill has no additional funds for the project and Democrats have staunchly opposed the addition of any. Even if Senate Democrats' objections were overruled, a final budget that includes funding for Yucca could face a veto (https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/legislative/sap/114/saphr2028r_20150428.pdf) from Obama.



The proposed design of the site.

Courtesy of U.S. Department of Energy

The logistics of getting the facility online again also pose a barrier to renewing the Yucca project. When Obama shuttered Yucca, which once hosted researchers and operators, five years ago, the site's staff were moved elsewhere and day-to-day operations in the current facilities were shut down. To get it going again, basic functions would have to resume, a costly proposition. On top of that, the licensing process, which is only about halfway done, is likely to be lengthy and expensive. And at least for now, the Department of Energy has withdrawn its support for the now-languishing application ~~there's not even an official application being considered.~~

Instead, Democrats say the focus for the nuclear waste problem should be on acquiring funds for short-term storage. Also, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., says, focus should be on repairing the only permanent facility in existence, the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, near Carlsbad, New Mexico. An accident there last year caused a small but noteworthy nuclear waste leak (<https://www.hcn.org/issues/46.10/the-leak-heard-round-the-nuclear-industry>).

"You could fill Yucca tomorrow and you'd still need more (space), so what we want to do is get on with the WIPP facility (getting) fixed," Feinstein told E&E News in June (<http://www.eenews.net/stories/1060020765>). Instead of Yucca, which has been mired in politics for years, she said lawmakers should focus on areas where they could actually make progress. "We know there are other states that would like to have a repository and get some of those things going."

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