

**Return to the [referring page](#).**

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October 26, 2005

# 'Clean' plan for Yucca repackaged

## DOE proposal unveiled

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WASHINGTON -- The Energy Department's plan to make Yucca Mountain a "clean" nuclear waste dump is just more of the same old garbage to project critics.

Energy officials on Tuesday unveiled a plan to make the overdue and overbudget project "simple, safer and more cost-effective."

Paul Golan, the project's acting director, said the plans would simplify the "design, licensing and construction" of the dump. If that goes as planned, it would presumably speed up the department's work and ease the burden the department will face when it goes to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission for a license.

Under the plan, the department would have waste sealed in standardized containers at the nuclear power plants. That would eliminate the need for a one-of-a-kind "multibillion-dollar" facility at Yucca Mountain to do so, leaving the site "primarily clean or 'noncontaminated,'" according to the department.

Golan said he was "personally very excited about this new path forward."

Nevada officials called the plan "desperate" and predicted a long delay in opening a nuclear waste dump at Yucca Mountain.

"After 20 years of work, DOE's (the Energy Department's) big announcement is that they will now start working toward a clean, uncontaminated site," Sens. Harry Reid, D-Nev., and John Ensign, R-Nev., said in a statement. "We have said all along the project is not safe and the science is bad, but never thought DOE would actually admit it."

The department's plan, though, may be part of a bigger proposal to push the project forward.

According to the energy trade publication International Radioactive Exchange, Golan wrote a memo Oct. 13 outlining an ambitious plan to move the project forward with legislation that would:

- \* Make it easier to fund the Yucca Mountain budget by removing it from the competitive congressional process;
- \* Allow building of two "aging pads" -- temporary above-ground storage facilities -- one on the Nevada Test Site and one at a site to be named later;
- \* Allow the construction of the aging pads without an environmental impact statement or a permit from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Department officials on Tuesday said they had not sent any proposed legislation to Congress and said they were concentrating on Golan's plan to make Yucca "clean." A spokesman for Rep. Shelley Berkley, D-Nev., said department officials disputed the report in the trade publication.

It probably would be difficult to move those proposals through Congress. The move to make it easier to fund Yucca Mountain has been shot down in Congress on previous attempts. And Reid has been a strong opponent and has deftly slowed Yucca legislation in the past.

The department did not have an estimate for how long the new casks would take to design or how much time this would add to the project's timeline.

The Energy Department asked Yucca contractor Bechtel SAIC to come up with a conceptual design for the new facilities. That plan will then be taken to an Energy Department advisory board for approval.

If that moves forward, the department would design stronger containers -- essentially double-bagging -- the nuclear waste. Those new containers would then be put in an extra container for shipping and a different container for burial at Yucca Mountain.

The big difference in the plans is that the containers won't be opened at Yucca Mountain.

At first glance, adding another cask layer to waste may seem to diminish some of Nevada's key arguments against the site: Canister corrosion inside the mountain will lead to radiation leaks, and waste is dangerous to transport.

But attorney Joe Egan, who handles Yucca legal issues for Nevada, said the state's own experiments have found that any metal inside the mountain will corrode.

"It's just two layers to corrode instead of one," Egan said.

He said this plan proves the Energy Department knows the project "is in deep trouble."

"They wouldn't be doing this if it wasn't," Egan said. The new cask idea is "sort of like the Mars program: It's a nice thought, but there are so many utopian aspects to it, it's hard to believe it will ever happen."

The Nuclear Energy Institute, the industry's interest group and a top Yucca advocate, supports the change in concept, spokeswoman Trish Conrad said.

Berkley, however, blasted the Energy Department's proposal.

"Calling plans to dump radioactive garbage in Nevada 'clean' is an insult to the intelligence of families in the Silver State and ignores the fact that nuclear waste is one of the deadliest substances on Earth," Berkley said in a statement.

"Regardless of how they repackage this waste, at the end of the day, it's still going to be dumped in Nevada, and it's still going to threaten the lives of millions of Americans living along transportation routes."

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**Return to the [referring page](#).**

[Las Vegas SUN main page](#)

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