

Nevadans question report on Yucca health risks

By Keith Rogers Las Vegas Review-Journal

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The federal Yucca Mountain nuclear waste project that's been presumed dead for five years still has a pulse.

And Nevadans for the most part are still fired up to keep it from rising from its ashes.

About 80 people showed up Tuesday night at a public meeting [to discuss a draft report](#) by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission staff.

The 173-page study found if a repository for tens of thousands of tons of highly radioactive used fuel from U.S. power reactors is ever licensed and built in a maze of tunnels in the mountain there would [only be "a negligible increase" in health risk](#) from nuclear particles that might leak into groundwater.

Richard Bryan, chairman of the Nevada Commission on Nuclear Projects, [said he's not ready "to gamble on the health and safety of Nevadans"](#) with a flawed nuclear waste disposal site that became the only one studied because of "raw naked politics. We were steamrolled."

Rep. Dina Titus, D-Nev., and Las Vegas Mayor Carolyn Goodman weighed in, saying that a repository is dangerous and bad for the tourism-based economy. The project's also been "flawed from the beginning and remains so," Titus said.

[A statement from Gov. Brian Sandoval](#) read by Nevada Agency for Nuclear Projects Director Bob Halstead noted that "DOE does not possess the land and water rights necessary to receive a construction authorization.

Most of the speakers bemoaned the project but a few lauded the report as a green light to move forward despite President Barack Obama's decision to mothball the project while scientists pursue a new path forward for nuclear waste disposal that doesn't include Yucca Mountain, a volcanic-rock ridge 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas that critics say is a flawed site.

Others disagree. Said Dr. Leonard Kreisler, former Nevada Test Site medical director: "There is no danger with the Yucca Mountain Project."

The study was among the tasks the regulatory commission had to complete after the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia ruled in 2013 that the the body shouldn't have shelved license hearings even though the project was shuttered when the Obama administration allowed funding to dry up in 2010 at the urging of then-U.S. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev.

The study concludes that the maximum dose from contamination in nearby Amargosa Valley — where another meeting is scheduled for 7 p.m. Thursday — would be 1.3 millirems, or a "small fraction" of normal background radiation of 300 millirems a year, "much less" than NRC standards.

For three decades since the site was singled out by Congress in 1987, the Department of Energy has spent \$15 billion studying the integrity of Yucca Mountain to contain 77,000 tons of spent fuel assemblies and defense wastes. A 5-mile tunnel loop was drilled to explore the mountain's features.

As DOE learned more about surface water moving downward and other pitfalls, scientists added engineered barriers such as titanium drip shields in their design to protect waste containers from corrosion. Nevada scientists and lawyers list the drip shields among 229 technical challenges they say should disqualify the license application.

Contact Keith Rogers at krogers@reviewjournal.com or 702-383-0308. Find him on Twitter: [@KeithRogers2](https://twitter.com/KeithRogers2)

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