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Yucca director downplays project timeline

He says nuclear waste repository unlikely to open before 2020

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WASHINGTON -- While the Department of Energy has set a target month of March 2017 for Yucca Mountain to begin receiving nuclear waste, the project director said Wednesday it "most probably" won't be opened until at least three years later.

Anticipated lawsuits by Nevada or others challenging a license for the Yucca site will account for the delays, Ward Sproat, director of the Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management, said in a presentation to a nuclear studies panel of the National Academies of Science.

"Bottom line is while that (2017) is a best achievable schedule, the most probable schedule is probably in the neighborhood of ... plus three and a half years," Sproat said.

Sproat's prediction did not take into account the possibility of even further delays from budget cuts and other obstacles that newly empowered Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., a leading critic of the nuclear dump, has said he will put in the Energy Department's path when Democrats take over Congress in January.

Talking with reporters after his presentation, Sproat said he has not calculated and would not guess how the new makeup of Capitol Hill may affect the program, including chances to pass a bill that the Energy Department has said is crucial to keep Yucca Mountain moving forward.

"I just don't know," Sproat said. "It is not my area of speculation how to get legislation through the Hill."

Elsewhere, the department took a step on another front Wednesday when it issued specifications for new multi-purpose canisters in which nuclear waste would be loaded at reactors, transported across the country and stored at Yucca Mountain, 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

Nuclear industry vendors were invited to fabricate designs based on the specifications for 17.6-foot-long alloy containers that would weigh 54 tons when loaded with radioactive spent fuel. The containers would be 5.5 feet in diameter.

The Energy Department plans to buy 7,300 of the "transportation, aging and disposal" containers. Department official Christopher Kouts declined to estimate total costs, saying that could affect negotiations with vendors.

Sproat's appearance before the nuclear studies board marked the first public showing by a Yucca Mountain manager since the Nov. 7 elections that propelled Democrats into control of the House and Senate.

Speaking to the academy panel, a congressional official said House support for Yucca Mountain generally crosses party lines and is not expected to diminish much.

But in the Senate, Reid will become majority leader with stronger powers to influence the nuclear waste debate, said Kevin Cook, Republican clerk on the House energy and water development subcommittee.

"The reality is Nevada holds a stronger hand now because of Senator Reid's position," Cook said.

The day after the elections, Reid said as majority leader he would not allow bills on the Senate floor that would speed Yucca Mountain development or clear away obstacles.

The Bush administration has proposed a "fix Yucca bill" that would authorize a land withdrawal, revamp the project's financing and

broaden DOE powers to claim the necessary permits and manage transportation and toxic waste at the site in order to move the project forward. Sproat testified to the Senate in August there was "zero" chance for DOE to meet deadlines if the "fix Yucca" bill does not pass.

Reid also said he would seek deeper spending cuts in the Yucca program. Congress has approved budgets of between \$450 million and \$500 million for the project in recent years, which Reid said "are not acceptable to me."

Future spending "will be cut back significantly, that will be for sure," he said.

A congressional official familiar with the budget process said Reid's insistence of deeper cuts may prove persuasive. "If DOE is saying 2017 at the earliest, and Senator Reid is saying never, people are going to ask questions whether it (Yucca Mountain) is still worth spending \$500 million a year on," said the official who asked not to be identified.