

Bob Halstead, Nevada's leading Yucca fighter, retires

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WASHINGTON — The man whose name is synonymous with Nevada's opposition to building a nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain is ending a career after three decades of service to the state under Democratic and Republican governors.

Bob Halstead, executive director for the Nevada Agency for Nuclear Projects, became a well-respected nemesis to the Department of Energy, Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the nuclear energy lobby.

Although the Trump administration and Yucca Mountain advocates from other states in Congress have backed off previous proposals to store 110,000 metric tons of spent fuel rods and radioactive waste north of Las Vegas, Halstead is reluctant to let down his guard.

"We haven't won the battle," Halstead, 71, said in an interview with the Review-Journal on Wednesday.

Halstead allowed, however, that watching President Donald Trump flip-flop in Las Vegas on Yucca Mountain this year was a momentous occasion in the decades-old fight between the state and the federal government.

Trump had pushed for three years to jump-start licensing. He did not do so this year, an election year in which Nevada remains a swing state and possibly pivotal to the presidential outcome.

"I think the high point is President Trump's speech in Las Vegas," Halstead said with a chortle, "because that meant we kicked his ass."

Wide-ranging fight

In addition to nuclear waste, Halstead also led the state's legal and scientific challenge to the National Nuclear Security Administration's secret shipments of weapons-grade plutonium to the Nevada National Security Site north of Las Vegas in 2018.

“I don’t want Interstate 11 to become the plutonium expressway,” Halstead told the Review-Journal at the time. He accused the Department of Energy of underhanded dealing in shipping the material even as the state openly was preparing a legal motion to stop it.

The blustery rhetoric toward the Energy Department was nothing new.

Halstead for years accused the department of submitting an application that was “bungled” to build the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository. Reciting memorized facts, analysis, missteps and faulty conclusions by government experts, he would often blurt out: “You can’t make this stuff up.”

Congress designated Yucca Mountain as the sole site for permanent nuclear waste from power plants and Navy ships. Under the George W. Bush administration, the Energy Department applied for a license to build the facility, but that was scrapped when President Barack Obama was elected and Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., became Senate majority leader.

Since then, Trump and lawmakers with nuclear power plants in their states have tried to restart the licensing process. Congress has failed to approve funding for the process.

‘A fierce and dedicated partner’

In a tribute to Halstead, Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, D-Nev., submitted to the Congressional Record on July 2 a statement that commemorated his deeds. His last day working for the state was technically July 5.

She said, “He has been a fierce and dedicated partner in the fight against the Yucca Mountain project.”

Halstead worked as executive director of the state’s nuclear projects agency since 2011. Prior to that, he was a consultant to the state about nuclear transportation issues in Nevada. In all, he has over 30 years of service to the state involving nuclear waste, radioactive materials and transportation.

Cortez Masto cited Halstead's institutional knowledge about the state's nuclear history in her July 2 tribute to his "decades long commitment to helping Nevadans."

Halstead was first hired by Bob Loux, who led the state's nuclear agency for 23 years, and resigned over a controversial pay issue. Republican Gov. Jim Gibbons appointed Bruce Breslow, previously a Sparks mayor, to run the office.

Gov. Brian Sandoval, a Republican, hired Halstead to run the agency in 2011, taking over from an acting caretaker.

Bipartisan figure, gone fishing

Halstead's tenure is marked by his ability to work with Republican and Democratic governors, U.S. senators and members of the House of Representatives. In his lifetime, Halstead has worked for 11 governors in several states, including six in Nevada.

It's part of his family lineage, public service for the people without a public showing of political leanings.

"They kept out of partisan issues," Halstead said.

His father was a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service special-agent-in-charge in eastern North Carolina. His grandfather fought against the plume trade in Florida.

"The business my family has chosen is environmental protection," Halstead said. "This is what I was born for."

As his career with Nevada ends, Halstead plans to hang a shingle as a consultant for nuclear waste issues, giving the state the right of first refusal.

Other than that, he's ordered a Nevada fishing license and plans to fish with wife Margaret and his two grown children back in Wisconsin, the family home.

"One of the first things I'll do when I get back there is go fishing together," he said.

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