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## Yucca's nuclear fallout

### Opponents cheer demise, but jobs vanish with site's closure

By VALERIE MILLER

LAS VEGAS BUSINESS PRESS

#### MORE INFO

- Yucca Mountain: Nuclear Waste in Nevada

#### YUCCA MOUNTAIN TIMELINE

1954  
The Atomic Energy Act directs the federal government to promote the peaceful use of atomic energy. The disposal of the highly radioactive waste produced is the responsibility of the federal government.

1957  
The National Academy of Sciences recommends deep geological burial for spent nuclear fuel and high-level radioactive wastes.

1970  
The Atomic Energy Commission, precursor to the Department of Energy, selects an old salt mine in Lyons, Kan., as the nation's first repository. Moving water is discovered inside the salt mine and further efforts to use this site as a repository stop.

1970s  
The Department of Energy begins to scope potential repository areas at the Nevada Test Site, including the Climax mine that experimentally stored 17 fuel rods until the area became unsafe for human entry.

1974  
President Gerald Ford bans spent fuel reprocessing after India detonates a nuclear device containing plutonium.

1982  
Congress approves the Nuclear Waste Policy Act, calling for two repositories — one in the East and one in the West. Nine potential sites are identified.

State and local leaders have spent a quarter century fighting the plan to make Nevada the dumping ground for the nation's highest-level nuclear waste. But even as the Yucca Mountain repository site turns into a virtual ghost town, proponents of the project vow not to let thousands of job opportunities slip away.

Nightmare scenarios of train derailments and truck accidents spilling deadly radioactive waste and destroying the state's tourism industry have been talked about for years by the dump's opponents. Still, the battle over placing nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain — just 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas — heated up as fast as the weather earlier this month. June started with two days of Nuclear Regulatory Commission hearings in Las Vegas to decide whether the Department of Energy can withdraw its application to ultimately ship high-level nuclear waste to the Nye County site.

The Yucca onslaught continued with a June 7 DOE letter ordering the project's main contractor, USA Repository Services, to cease all work on the project that is not related to contract and employee terminations, record-keeping and network support tasks.

The DOE letter, obtained by the Las Vegas Business Press, is another step toward the project's demise.

"By June 14, 2010, USA RS shall provide DOE a plan to complete contract shutdown by Sept. 30, 2010," the agency directed.

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1983  
The DOE names nine potential repository sites in six states. The Nevada Legislature creates the Nuclear Waste Project Office, under the governor's office, to review activities by the DOE as it begins to scope sites around the country, including Yucca Mountain.

1985  
The Legislature transforms the Nuclear Waste Project Office into the independent Agency for Nuclear Projects and creates the Nevada Commission on Nuclear Projects to advise the governor and Legislature on matters related to the disposal of radioactive waste. The Clark County Commission begins passing resolutions against a high-level nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain.

1986  
The DOE selects sites in Nevada, Washington and Texas for detailed investigation, one of which is Yucca Mountain.

1987  
Congress amends the Nuclear Waste Policy Act, singling out Yucca Mountain on the edge of the Nevada Test Site as the location for the DOE to study as a nuclear waste repository after costs to study multiple sites soar.

1988  
The Nuclear Waste Program of Comprehensive Planning in Clark County is created to provide oversight, assess effects on communities and provide public outreach on the Yucca Mountain Project.

1991  
Surface studies begin at Yucca Mountain.

1993  
DOE begins grading work and formulates a program that schedules waste acceptance by 2010.

1994  
Tunneling into Yucca Mountain begins for Exploratory Studies Facility.

1997  
Tunnel Boring Machine breaks through rock, completing the five-mile long Exploratory Studies Facility tunnel.

1998  
The DOE misses its deadline for opening a nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain, and nuclear utilities begin to sue the government for failing to take the waste.

2000  
President Bill Clinton vetoes nuclear waste legislation passed by Congress.

2001  
The Environmental Protection Agency

The DOE correspondence also rejects an earlier proposal by USA to finish some Yucca work.

"We have determined that to complete ongoing work projects and to develop knowledge retention packages are both costly and unnecessary," the DOE wrote.

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Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., praised what he called the end of the Yucca Mountain project.

"It's closed. It's gone," said Reid, who is up for re-election in November. "I've been saying that for a long time, that it is gone. But it is finally gone."

Euphoria over the dump's demise is tempered by the further loss of jobs in Nevada that is certain to follow.

"I feel very bad that people are losing their jobs," Reid said. "But the alternative would have been more people in our service industry losing their jobs."

end of Yucca, or a new beginning?

Supporters of putting a nuclear waste repository in Yucca Mountain aren't giving up. Former Nevada Gov. Robert List has spent about a decade pushing for the project. List works as a consultant for several Nevada counties, including Churchill, Lander, Esmeralda and Mineral.

White Pine County and the states of Washington and South Carolina — both producers of nuclear waste — are allied with List's clients in the battle to force the DOE to submit its application to the commission.

"We believe the Nuclear Waste Policy Act expresses in its terms, that they must proceed with the application, and the NRC must approve or disapprove of the application," List said.

The Construction Authorization Board, a licensing arm of the NRC made up of three administrative judges, will have a say in the future of the Yucca application. The commission board, also known as CAB, will rule on whether to honor the Department of Energy's request to withdraw its application for the project. They publicly heard arguments from both sides on June 3.

The second day of the commission hearings at the Pacific Enterprise Plaza on Pepper Lane was far less dramatic; archiving proposals for thousands of Yucca-related documents was the main topic of discussion. But for Yucca die-hards on both sides, every step toward the project's demise is closely observed.

Bruce Breslow, Nevada's executive director of the Agency for Nuclear Projects, maintained that Yucca Mountain is a bad choice for a nuclear waste storage facility. He opposes the plan to send 1,000 shipments of the most toxic nuclear waste to Nevada each year.

Breslow called the DOE's science faulty and said the federal agency's application was "full of holes."

"The state of Nevada has 223 safety, environmental and legal contentions that have been admitted by federal judges," Breslow said.

The Energy Department, under the Obama administration, has changed its stance on Yucca Mountain and wants to abandon plans to put a nuclear repository on the site.

One of the state's safety concerns involves the delayed installation of 1,500 titanium "drip shields" at the site, Breslow said. The shields are designed to prevent groundwater contamination from the nuclear waste and would cost between \$8 billion and \$10 billion to install, he said.

However, the Energy Department did not have plans to put in the

Let's get going.

Protection Agency announces proposed radiation standards for Yucca Mountain.

2002  
President George W. Bush and Congress approve Yucca Mountain as a nuclear waste repository for the nation's radioactive waste.  
In April, Nevada Gov. Kenny Guinn vetoes the designation of Yucca Mountain, but Congress overrides the veto with a two-thirds majority vote. Bush signs the joint resolution into law July 23, officially designating Yucca Mountain as the nation's proposed repository site.

2003  
The DOE is scheduled to release a nuclear waste transportation plan. Nevada prepares for oral arguments in front of the D.C. Court of Appeals.

2006  
The DOE changes its written timetable, estimating that it will begin accepting spent fuel and high-level nuclear waste at a Yucca Mountain repository from 2010 to March 31, 2017.

2008  
The DOE expects to submit a license application.

2010  
In February, President Barack Obama's proposed federal budget for fiscal year 2011 is released, eliminating funding for the program to build a nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain.  
The Department of Energy budget provides funds for a nuclear waste management strategy.  
The Department of Energy files a motion to stay the Nuclear Regulatory Commission licensing proceedings and indicated its intent to formally withdraw the license application within prejudice in 30 days.  
"With prejudice" means the DOE can't bring back the application in the future.  
Beginning on June 3, Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Construction Authorization Board convenes in Las Vegas for two days of hearing to decide whether the Department of Energy should be able to withdraw its application to build a nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain. Archiving of Yucca documents is discussed.  
On June 7, the Department of Energy sends a letter to Yucca Mountain's contractor, USA Repository Services, ordering it to cease work on the Yucca project and begin terminating employees and contracts.

drip shields until 80 to 100 years after the initial shipments of nuclear waste arrived at Yucca Mountain.

Breslow pointed to that as one safety risk with no practical proposed solution.

"The temperature in the mountain (from nuclear waste) would reach 500 degrees, hotter than any human could bear," he explained. "So, they would have to send robots in to install the heat shields, and after a hundred years, conditions would have deteriorated and rocks would have fallen."

The DOE did not respond to requests for comments for this article.

List offered his own theory on why the agency might want to keep a low profile.

"I think the DOE is embarrassed by it (the loss of jobs)," he said. "I don't think they want to admit the consequences of their arbitrary action."

Where the jobs aren't

Estimates vary on just how many jobs were, and still are, tied to the proposed Yucca Mountain repository. List's tally includes as many as 2,000 DOE employees and contractors working on the project during the last decade. About 80 percent of those were believed to have lived in the Las Vegas Valley.

Today, only around 600 work at Yucca or in a related capacity. The number of workers started dwindling as Yucca's funding was strangled through the efforts of Nevada's congressional delegation, List said.

"By September, it will be down to about 25 (workers). It will just be environmental management workers," he noted.

Paul Seidler has been on both sides of the Yucca debate over the years, but today he heads the Las Vegas-based Nevada Alliance for Defense. The Alliance is a group that focuses on technology development.

To Seidler, Yucca was always more of a temporary solution to the permanent problem of nuclear waste. Allowing the temporary storage of nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain would have meant retaining, and adding, thousands of high-paying jobs, he said.

"Our alliance's interest is in making sure the economy of Southern Nevada diversifies," he said.

Seidler also pointed to the trickle-down effect. Those Yucca contractors often worked from large offices in Summerlin, now vacant, and spent money in the community.

"We had about 2,000 people working on the project, and now we have about 400, and that number is going down," he added.

Yucca Mountain opponents say the emphasis on job growth is misleading. The Great Recession would be long over before any measurable employment impact from the Yucca project could possibly be felt.

"The licensing phase would take at least four or five years, so we wouldn't see any jobs increase until its opening in 2020," said Irene Navis, planning manager of Clark County Department of Comprehensive Planning's Nuclear Waste Program. "And the construction jobs would be in Nye County."

Navis has been "working her way out of a job" for a while. For most employees, that would be a sign of poor job performance. However, in Navis' case, it's a sign of a job well done.

The department of comprehensive planning has been fighting the proposal to dump nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain since 1985.

"For the longest time, they kept telling us we didn't have much of a chance, (that) it was a done deal," she said. "Now, we are in a strange position in supporting the DOE in its (attempts to withdraw) its application."

Yucca's uncertain future

If the DOE can drop its plan to make Yucca Mountain the nation's nuclear waste repository, many wonder what will become of the site and its former workers. Reid has promised to try to help those employees losing their livelihoods.

"Federal employees were offered early retirement and buyouts

### Yucca's nuclear fallout - Business - Rev...



Workers at Nevada's Yucca Mountain repository begin their day at the entrance to the tunnel in May 2000. LAURA RAUCH/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE PHOTO

Federal employees were offered early retirements and buyouts, or transfers to a new office in Las Vegas," he said.

Federal stimulus funding programs may create jobs for some displaced Yucca workers, too.

Ideas abound for the site. Breslow listed some of the top possibilities for Yucca's alternative uses, including using it as a national data storage facility for computer servers. Another option is converting the mountain, which sits on the Nevada Test Site, into a mining school of some sort.

Counterterrorism activities might be conducted at Yucca Mountain because of its high-security location. Yucca also might be used as a base to detect hidden underground testing facilities in other countries.

"We are also looking at a lot of renewable energy projects at the Nevada Test Site," Breslow said.

Seidler would like to see Yucca used as a location to manufacture the radioactive isotopes used in medical procedures.

List is less hopeful a project of the repository's magnitude can be replaced.

"I don't see anything else with the type of jobs created by this project," the former governor said. "It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It's the biggest public works project in Nevada since Hoover Dam."

Contact reporter Valerie Miller at [vmiller@lvbusinesspress.com](mailto:vmiller@lvbusinesspress.com) or 702-387-5286.



A gate on a security fence blocks the north entrance to the 5-mile tunnel that loops into Yucca Mountain, located 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas. The Department of Energy closed the exploratory tunnel earlier this year for safety concerns following funding cutbacks that eliminated staffing and forced officials to shut off ventilation and lights.

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**Tom.Reynolds** wrote on *June 21, 2010 06:47 AM*:

Let me throw out three data points for consideration: 1) The wind doesn't blow all the time. 2) The sun doesn't shine all the time. 3) No technology currently exists for storing large amounts of electricity for long periods of time. Until those three issues are resolved, solar and wind power will not be able to provide ALL our nation's energy needs. Period. Which means that nuclear power is the ONLY currently available viable alternative to burning fossil fuels. Like it or not.

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**Webster** wrote on *June 21, 2010 06:40 AM*:

"I feel very bad that people are losing their jobs," Reid said. "But the alternative would have been more people in our service industry losing their jobs." If the DOE can drop its plan to make Yucca Mountain the nation's nuclear waste repository, many wonder what will become of the site and its former workers. Reid has promised to try to help those employees losing their livelihoods. Federal stimulus funding programs may create jobs for some displaced Yucca workers, too. I have worked on the project for many years and have watched thousands of people get laid off, and to my knowledge not one of those people were helped by Harry Reid to get a new job, as promised. Well Harry my resume is on it's way. I NEED A JOB.

---

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**marc** wrote on *June 21, 2010 01:12 AM*:

Same talks of the ignorants..."selling your souls to the devil".."you will glow in the dark"... etc. That's why Reid use the ignorance and low educational backgrounds of most Nevadans to keep winning the senate. If you google Yucca Mountain... it has been studied for almost 30 years now and it will not be a nuclear power plant. The site is a wasteland as over 900 nuclear bombs were tested in the area. What is far dangerous is letting the waste sit on an above ground storage cask in over 100 sites and in cooling pools where they are almost filled to capacity...just like the one in Palo Verde Nuclear Plant in Arizona and San Onofre Power Plant in San Diego.

---

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**JR** wrote on *June 20, 2010 11:45 PM*:

Wow, talk about selling your soul to the devil when things are down. The thousands of jobs generated by Yucca would not mean anything if an accident irradiated Las Vegas. Does anyone really trust the government to do ANYTHING right? Google Chernobyl to see what can happen if we sell out our future for some jobs now.

---

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**TAX.PAYER** wrote on *June 20, 2010 11:42 PM*:

THANKS DIRTY HARRY, WITH YOUR HELP NEVADA JUST MIGHT SEE 20 PERCENT UNEMPLOYMENT BY NEXT MONTH. ANYONE WHO WOULD VOTE FOR YOU IN NOVEMBER MUST HAVE A SCREW LOOSE !!!!!!!!!!!!!

---

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**jackmagic** wrote on *June 20, 2010 11:13 PM*:

I agree we need to find a solution to storing or disposing of nuclear waste, but I don't think it should be done half-assed which seems to be the case with Yucca. With all these security questions basically unanswered, it was a bad idea to proceed. Should it have been killed? Probably not, but it should have been stopped until all of the safety issues were resolved. We yell and scream at BP for not having backups for their backups... and that's "just" oil in the water. Imagine a catastrophe at Yucca because it was rushed, or the one problem we have is the one they never created an answer to.

---

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**kapechi** wrote on *June 20, 2010 09:20 PM*:

How does your goofy Sen. Reid make the statement that losing jobs at Yucca means saving jobs in the "service industry" with a straight face? If you Nevadans keep sending this goofball to Congress, you will become more of a laughing stock than you are already with City Center.

---

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**Jeff.Durbin MSgt USAF Ret** wrote on *June 20, 2010 08:14 PM*:

Shutting down Yucca Mountain is the worst thing that could be done to Clark County during a period of its growth where it had a chance to diversify its economy. The thousands of good jobs this new industry would of had created is now temporarily lost until those in Congress get their heads out of their arses! I have to agree with a previous comment regarding the BP spill and the major environmental damage being done right now, because we are still relying on an

energy source that will eventually dry up and be gone. I personally think the reason why no one is really and truly addressing this issue, is that it will not happen in our lifetimes. Therefore, it is easier now to turn a blind eye to the potential problem that others will inherit and have to take actions to rectify. While the green programs are great and beneficial to many of us now, we need to look at the future. Nuclear waste is not going to go away. We need to take a negative and turn it into a positive. With Yucca Mountain, Clark County had an opportunity to advance its work force highly educated and very technical persons.

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**Phargo** wrote on *June 20, 2010 08:05 PM*:

The government spent billions building that facility. Reid never piped up until he needed a diversionary trick to make it look like he gives a hoot about us here in Nevada. He is more concerned with kissin' up to Obama.

Report abuse

**thgirbla** wrote on *June 20, 2010 07:55 PM*:

I hope that everyone remembers that Senile Harry was instrumental in getting THIS project assigned to Nevada !!! BTW: Following the Nov. Defeat, Senile Harry can go back to Nevada and open a Wh\$\$\$house. HE has alot of experience screwing the Public.

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