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Yucca Mountain opposition to be focus at Las Vegas conference

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WASHINGTON — Nevada's opposition to Trump administration efforts to revive the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste project will be underscored Tuesday at a Las Vegas conference on radioactive waste where government and industry experts will gather.

"Nevada's opposition to Yucca Mountain has never been stronger," said Robert Halstead, executive director for the state's Agency for Nuclear Projects.

Halstead is one of roughly two dozen experts on nuclear energy scheduled to speak at the RadWaste Summit, which runs Tuesday through Thursday at the JW Marriott Las Vegas. More than 200 professionals and officials are signed up to attend.

The Department of Energy is expected to explain its plans for nuclear waste disposal, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission is slated to give an update on regulatory initiatives and licensing for permanent and interim storage sites.

Yucca Mountain was designated by Congress in 1987 as the proposed site for permanent storage of nuclear waste produced by power plants nationwide.

The DOE, under President George W. Bush, filed a construction license application with the NRC in 2008.

That application was withdrawn by DOE in 2010 under President Barack Obama, who empanelled a Blue Ribbon Commission on America's Nuclear Future to study new alternatives to storage of waste. The Obama administration defunded the project.

President Donald Trump in January included \$120 million in his 2018 budget blueprint for fiscal year 2018, which begins Oct. 1, to restart the licensing process on the Yucca Mountain repository, a process that the NRC has estimated will take three to five years to complete.

House Republicans are moving forward with a bill that authorizes that funding, and adds \$30 million for the NRC to prepare for licensing. The bill also would increase the amount of

nuclear waste storage at Yucca Mountain from 70,000 metric tons to 110,000 metric tons until a second repository is in operation.

Lawmakers from states with power plants have urged Congress to move on permanent storage, noting a growing stockpile of waste being held at generating facilities.

Energy Secretary Rick Perry has called it a “moral imperative” to address nuclear waste storage because of security and environmental concerns.

Storage at Yucca Mountain, however, remains controversial. Located in Nye County, just 100 miles from Las Vegas, the Yucca Mountain tunnel has been mothballed after \$15 billion in federal funds to explore and study the site.

Where Nevadans stand

Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval, the state’s two U.S. senators and three-fourths of the congressional delegation have vowed to fight federal “forced-siting” of a repository in the state. Nevada has filed over 200 legal challenges to the initial application.

There are local supporters, though. U.S. Rep. Mark Amodei, R-Nev., and several rural Nevada counties, including Nye, support moving forward on the licensing process to determine whether Yucca Mountain would be a safe site for permanent nuclear waste storage.

Dan Schinhofen, chairman of the Nye County Board of County Commissioners, will speak to the conference on the “importance of the rule of law and science as we move forward with the licensing of Yucca Mountain.”

“While the state wants nothing more than another 20-year delay, we welcome the chance for the science to be finally heard by the NRC,” Schinhofen said.

Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., said he plans to file a bipartisan bill in the Senate this year that would include Yucca Mountain as part of plans on nuclear waste, but the legislation would also call for a robust plan for interim storage at sites with less public opposition.

Alexander said his bill would call for the creation of a new federal agency, removing the nuclear waste program from the DOE.

Halstead said the Blue Ribbon Commission on America’s Nuclear Future and the Nuclear Energy Institute also have recommended moving the nuclear waste program to a federal corporation.

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