

Yucca bill stalls, at least for this session

As noted, no one seems to understand national priorities.

Las Vegas Sun
June 23, 2006

Despite strong pressure from the nuclear energy industry and the Bush administration, Congress almost certainly will not put Yucca Mountain on a fast track this year.

Legislation to "fix Yucca" once and for all hit a wall shortly after it was introduced in Congress two months ago. Republicans and Democrats alike say the bill reaches for too much too fast, while failing to address the latest darling in the nuclear energy debate _ recycling.

Barring a miracle, the administration will have to try again in the next Congress _ the last of the Bush presidency _ to get the stalled Yucca nuclear waste storage plan moving again.

"I'm hoping 11:30 at night, somebody's going to wake up and say, 'We have to do this. Let's get it done,'" said Charles Pray, co-chairman of the U.S. Transport Council's Yucca Mountain Task Force, a leading advocacy group for the nuclear transportation industry.

The apparent failure of the "fix Yucca" bill comes despite a near-perfect alignment of powerful interests. The Bush administration is the most pro-nuclear administration in decades. Republicans control both houses of Congress. The nuclear industry is pushing hard to get the project moving again.

But the Energy Department did not deliver its "fix Yucca" bill as early in the year as Congress wanted. When the legislation did arrive, it contained elements that many lawmakers opposed, while failing to include provisions they sought.

"It's a greedy bill and goes way beyond any realm of sensibleness," said Michele Boyd, a legislative director at Public Citizen, which has fought Yucca Mountain.

"Even senators in the past who have voted for Yucca Mountain say, 'No way.' "

Yucca is years behind schedule, despite \$8 billion in spending and the involvement of 25,000 scientists dedicated to creating the nation's first high-level nuclear waste repository.

Introduced by two leading Republican advocates of nuclear power _ Sen. Pete Domenici of New Mexico and Rep. Joe Barton of Texas _ the bill would lift the cap on the amount of waste that can be stored at Yucca Mountain, turn the site over to the Department of Energy and guarantee a funding stream that could not be knocked down by opponents in Congress.

Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., called the bill dead on arrival when it was introduced in April. Both Reid and Nevada Republican Sen. John Ensign oppose the development of Yucca Mountain and especially do not want to cede so much authority to the Energy Department.

Reid might well have outmaneuvered Yucca supporters and bottled up the bill. But he apparently didn't need to. The legislation failed to include provisions about nuclear

waste recycling that is now a prominent issue in the Bush White House and a favorite of Domenici, chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, where the bill languishes.

"Obviously there are a lot of things holding it up because you have two generally sympathetic committee chairmen who could schedule a hearing _ and they're not," said a spokesman for Sen. Jeff Bingaman of New Mexico, a nuclear energy advocate and the ranking Democrat on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. No hearings have been set, either, in Barton's House Energy and Commerce Committee.

Despite dimming prospects for the bill, some Republicans and nuclear industry officials still hope it will move forward this year. Domenici signaled this week that he was trying to find a way to include nuclear recycling in the legislation.

Recycling is part of the Bush administration's far-reaching _ and some say unrealistic _ initiative to develop technology that would reprocess nuclear fuel in a way that would render the waste less toxic and curtail its volume. Doing so would reduce the risks involved in transporting and storing nuclear waste at Yucca and also allow it to accept waste for many more years before reaching its storage capacity.

The Bush initiative, known as Global Nuclear Energy Partnership, could clear the way for construction of more domestic nuclear energy plants. It also would stem the spread of nuclear weapons by providing an alternative method of reprocessing nuclear fuel. The current method, used elsewhere in the world, can be modified to produce plutonium, a critical component of nuclear weapons.

Critics, however, say the initiative is a boondoggle that would cost tens of billions of dollars and take decades to come to fruition.

Dennis R. Spurgeon, assistant secretary for nuclear energy in the Energy Department, acknowledged Thursday it will be difficult to get the bill through this session.

Pray, who has increased his travel budget by \$10,000 this year to rally nuclear-power generating states to the cause, said the industry is well aware of the need to find success before the Republican stronghold on Congress and the White House fades.

"That would close opportunities," he said.