

New opening date for Yucca Mountain waste dump is 2017

Unfortunately, for those who have been part of the program, this date is no more likely than the last.

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The Energy Department has a new opening date for the long-delayed Yucca Mountain nuclear waste dump in Nevada: March 31, 2017.

That is 19 years late. But it is the first concrete timeline the department has produced in some time. ***(Ed: it is 35 years late from the first intention in 1982.)***

The Energy Department planned to announce the schedule at a congressional hearing Wednesday but shared it with congressional offices Tuesday. Several of them made it public.

Under the schedule, the department would submit its license application to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission on June 30, 2008, get authorization to begin construction on Sept. 30, 2011, complete construction on March 30, 2016 and begin accepting nuclear waste on March 31, 2017.

The dates correspond to general goals department officials have shared recently with lawmakers.

"Our work will continue to be based on sound science The program now has reachable, definable target dates that will allow us to open Yucca Mountain as the nation's repository for spent nuclear fuel," Energy Department spokesman Craig Stevens said in a statement.

}This is an ambitious schedule, but it's nice to actually see a schedule. This is the most detailed schedule on Yucca Mountain that I have seen in recent memory," said Senate Energy Committee Chairman Pete Domenici.

But Domenici, who last month released a proposal for interim nuclear waste storage at federal sites across the country, said his plan still would be needed because the government is years past its 1998 deadline to begin accepting spent fuel from nuclear reactors.

Yucca Mountain is planned as the first national repository for nuclear waste and is meant to hold at least 77,000 tons of the material for thousands of years. The dump site is in the desert 90 miles (145 kilometers) northwest of Las Vegas.

The project has been delayed repeatedly by lawsuits, funding shortfalls, evidence that government scientists flouted quality control standards _ requiring their work to be redone _ and other problems.

There are more than 50,000 tons (45,500 metric tons) of highly radioactive nuclear waste waiting at nuclear power plants in 31 states. The government is obligated by contract to take the waste off the utilities' hands but has not done so because it has no place to put it.