

New Congress may nix Yucca Mountain nuclear site

Yucca Mountain, like it or not, is a political football.

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A few years ago, the plan to store the nation's nuclear waste in Nevada seemed all but certain.

Congress decided that highly radioactive waste from commercial nuclear-power plants, which takes centuries to decay, needed to be stored underground. And it reaffirmed by wide margins in 2002 that Yucca Mountain, 100 miles from Las Vegas, was the place to build such a repository.

But now that idea is being rethought, for a variety of reasons. And because the Nov. 7 elections propelled Democrats into power on Capitol Hill, that thinking is likely to accelerate, despite strong bipartisan support for Yucca Mountain in Congress.

The incoming Senate majority leader, Harry Reid of Nevada, long has pledged that Yucca Mountain will never open. The incoming chairwoman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., agrees. Both voted against the Yucca repository.

They say nuclear waste should stay right where it is -- at the nation's nuclear-power plants -- at least until better waste technology comes along.

"There's no rush to put it someplace that's dangerous," Boxer said.

There are questions about how safe the Yucca Mountain facility would be, and others about whether transporting radioactive waste on roads and rail lines would pose unacceptable risks of accidents or terrorist attacks.

More than 100 national and state environmental groups coalesced in September behind a set of principles that include permanent storage of used fuel at the reactor sites.

Yucca Mountain dispute

The nuclear-power industry also is giving ground. It still wants Yucca Mountain opened, but it's willing to allow taxes that plant operators pay into a fund for Yucca Mountain to be used for interim storage, a kind of euphemism for aboveground storage until there is a way to reprocess old fuel assemblies safely into new fuel.

Nuclear Energy Institute President Frank Bowman told the Senate environment committee in September that surface-level interim storage could "instill public confidence in the waste-management program."

That confidence may have eroded because the Energy Department is eight years late in responding to a federal mandate to open an underground repository. Deputy Energy Secretary Clay Sell said recently that it could be decades before Yucca Mountain opens.

Among Boxer's biggest concerns about Yucca Mountain is that it is not as impervious to water as initially thought. Testing has shown that water percolates through its caverns and heads toward the Colorado River.

"Sixteen million Californians drink from that river," Boxer said.

Jon Summers, Reid's spokesman, said the senator would do all he could to make sure Yucca Mountain never opened because the site was unsuitable. He said Reid had introduced legislation a year ago directing the Energy Department to take possession of the waste at the nation's nuclear plants and store it on site.

Energy bill's future

The bill went nowhere this year. The chairman of the Senate environment committee, James Inhofe, R-Okla., favors a Yucca Mountain repository. When the bill is reintroduced in 2007, however, Boxer will be heading the committee -- and she likes it, or something like it.

Growing interest in building a new generation of nuclear plants since the enactment of an energy bill that offers generous government subsidies is driving the industry's shifting attitude about waste storage.

Since Congress began working on the energy bill, nearly three-dozen applications for new reactors have been planned. The bill was signed into law in August 2005.