

PERSPECTIVE

Yucca Mountain Saved by Obama's Bell

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The long fight in the desert over a nuclear repository headed for Yucca Mountain between Nevada and the United States Department of Energy (DOE) is apparently over, and the man primarily responsible and who fought hardest to save Las Vegas from inheriting transported spent nuclear waste through their city is the state's senior senator, Harry Reid.

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Screw Nevada No More

Yucca Mountain is a touchy issue for Nevadans. Since 1987, Nevada officials have battled Congress and the DOE when the Yucca Mountain site, located on federal desert land just 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas, became singled out as the lone site left for consideration for the future nuclear waste dump, as Congress dropped two other locations in Texas and Washington state as potential sites. This amendment to the 1982 Nuclear Waste Policy Act became widely known as the “Screw Nevada” bill by Reid and other Nevada officials who began in earnest to oppose the measure.

Flash forward to 2009. The new Barack Obama administration had barely introduced a new DOE secretary when it announced the elimination of the Yucca Mountain repository program in its 2010 spending plan, a campaign promise Obama had made to withdraw the Yucca application to license the dump to operate and explore alternatives for the country's nuclear waste disposal. In March, Energy Sec-

retary Steven Chu told a Senate hearing the Yucca Mountain site no longer was viewed as an option for storing nuclear waste.

In fact, the 2010 budget represented a complete turnaround from just a few years ago, when the Bush administration supported the site location. In 2005, George W. Bush proposed \$880 million for the Yucca project site, an amount that was never appropriated by Congress, however. In Bush's last year in office, \$386 million was approved for the entire nuclear waste program under a continuing resolution.

Making the shutdown of the Yucca nuclear repository site even sweeter was that Nevada fought the long fight almost alone. Neighboring western states were reluctant to support Nevada's battle lest they be considered as potential dump sites. Arizona Republican John McCain was an outspoken advocate of the Screw Nevada bill, which was not lost on Nevadans during the polls of his failed 2008 presidential run.

Obama took office in January 2009, but it was not clear how soon the new administration would act on nuclear waste policy or even the direction it would take. Congress approved only \$288.4 million for the project through the end of the fiscal year on September 30, of which 80% was to be spent in Nevada. In a clear victory for Reid, this was further reduced to \$196.8 million under Obama in a redirected means for the DOE to explore alternatives for nuclear waste disposal and to continue participation in the repository license proceeding before the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Cultural and Environmental Impact

Most Nevadans feel it is unfair for Nevada to have to store nuclear waste when there are no nuclear power plants in the state. The state already is home to the Nevada Test Site, which borders Yucca Mountain to the east and is where hundreds of nuclear weapons have been dropped since the 1960s and continues to serve as a primary

nuclear detonation site. In essence, southern Nevada's fragile desert is already paying the price for radioactive destruction.

Las Vegas, with a population of 2 million, fears the impact of nuclear radioactive waste being transported through its congested highways and high population areas, should a leak or accident occur. Spent nuclear waste would travel by rail and/or truck in heavy-duty shipping casks approved by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. Despite government assurances, other states share the same concern as Nevada of moving the nuclear waste through their highly populated cities via railroad or highway.

Evidence from archaeological surveys has shown that American Indian populations have used the Yucca Mountain vicinity periodically and historically for agricultural, religious, and cultural purposes. These traditional farming and ceremonial practices occurred before European contact was established. Various tribes, including the Southern Paiute, Owens Valley Paiute, and Western Shoshone, view Yucca Mountain and surrounding lands holistically and in a central manner—that earth, water, air, vegetation, animals, and geology are intrinsically interrelated and dependent on one another for existence.

With the threat of Yucca Mountain looming as a potential nuclear waste repository, the historical and cultural significance has often been lost. Studies of the ecological and life-sustaining balance of this unique volcanic ridge created 12–15 million years ago have generally not been without bias.

Alternatives and Future of Nuclear Energy

Despite nuclear energy poised to remain an important source of electricity in the years to come, Obama is adamant that the country seek a better solution than Yucca Mountain—one that is based on sound science and carries broad support. As global competition for hydrocarbon fuels remains constant, the demand for renewable alternative energy sources will continue to intensify. As nuclear power continues to

grow as an alternative energy source, the question of how to deal with its toxic by-product remains unresolved.

At present, Secretary Chu's announcement of a blue ribbon commission to evaluate options and make recommendations to the Obama administration may take less time

than previously imagined. The trade industry is already reporting on discussions currently under way to transport the country's nuclear waste to an existing low-level waste site in a salt formation in New Mexico. The battle over Yucca Mountain in Nevada may be over, but the fight may just be starting in the Land of Enchantment.

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