

Nuclear Waste Won't Go to Yucca Mountain

(March 4) — The Obama administration took further steps this week to kill the controversial high-level radioactive waste repository at Nevada's Yucca Mountain despite the president's push to expand nuclear power in the U.S. and strong opposition from at least two states.

Energy Department officials filed a motion Wednesday with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to withdraw the agency's license application for the Yucca Mountain site, according to NRC spokesman David McIntyre.

"That action will provide finality in ending the Yucca Mountain project for a permanent geologic repository and will enable the Blue Ribbon Commission ... to focus on alternative methods of meeting the federal government's obligation to take high-level waste and spent nuclear fuel," the motion read.

South Carolina and Washington state began planning legal action to oppose the shutdown after the facility's funding was eliminated last month. Both states were banking on the repository program to take their nuclear waste.

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The Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository is about 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas. The government is looking at other options for disposing of waste.

The Energy Department was supposed to assume responsibility for storing high-level radioactive waste produced at the nation's utility companies in an underground repository at Yucca Mountain, according to the Nuclear Waste Policy Act put in place in 1982.

Utility companies in the 31 states operating 104 reactors have collected more than \$30 billion from their ratepayers for the Nuclear Waste Fund earmarked to pay for the underground storage facility, which was slated to open as soon as 2017. Energy

officials filed for a license application for the facility in June 2008. Now they're asking to withdraw it less than two years later.

Ratepayers are still paying into the Nuclear Waste Fund. The nuclear industry wants collection of that money suspended until an alternative plan is put in place.

"Electricity customers should no longer contribute more than \$750 million in annual payments into a fund that has a \$22 billion surplus and earns annual interest in excess of \$1 billion," Marvin Fertel, president of the Nuclear Energy Institute, said in a statement.

The administration's filing Wednesday came as no surprise to the industry, given President Barack Obama's long-held opposition to the program. "States should not be unfairly burdened with waste from other states," then-Sen. Obama wrote in a 2006 letter to then-chairman of the Senate Energy Committee, Sen. Pete Domenici.

The president, however, recently tripled federal loan guarantees for construction of new nuclear facilities to \$54.5 billion and called for the creation of a commission to look into alternatives for nuclear waste storage. The commission is scheduled to have its first meeting March 25.

"Right now waste is stored at individual facilities," White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said in a Feb. 16 press briefing. "The president understands that in order for this to be the type of source that it needs to be in the future, we do have to seek a permanent storage facility for that waste, and that's what he believes this commission will be charged to do."

Obama's decision has left states that were counting on the Nevada mountain repository in limbo, says one state lawmaker.

According to South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford, residents of his state now stand to

get nothing in return for the \$1.2 billion they have paid into the Nuclear Waste Fund. South Carolina is reliant on nuclear reactors for supplying about half of its electric power demands. The state also stores high-level waste at its Savannah River Site, where nuclear weapons were once made.

"The Yucca Mountain project provides a path out for the roughly 4,000 metric tons of nuclear waste temporarily housed at the Savannah River Site and other environmentally sensitive areas across South Carolina today," Sanford said in a statement last week.

South Carolina anticipated the Energy Department's move to withdraw the Yucca Mountain license application, filing a petition to block the move Friday with the U.S. 4th Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond, Va. The state also filed a petition to intervene with the NRC.

"South Carolina has a vested interest in insuring that the Yucca Mountain licensing proceedings continue, so that the spent fuel and other nuclear material now being temporarily stored in our state will be safely placed in the Yucca Mountain repository, as mandated by the United States Congress," state Attorney General Henry McMaster said in a statement.

Washington state Attorney General Rob McKenna said Monday that he planned on soon filing a petition to intervene with the NRC as well.

"We are disappointed that since so much work has gone on in past years with the Yucca Mountain Project that no funding has been placed in the budget," said Rita Sipe, spokeswoman for Duke Energy, which has seven reactors scattered throughout North and South Carolina.

Until consensus is reached for an alternative to the Nevada repository, nuclear facilities continue preparing their waste for the eventuality of off-site storage.

“We are treating and closing tanks today, even though there’s no Yucca Mountain,” said Jim Giusti, spokesman for the Energy Department at the Savannah River Site.

The 37 million gallons of liquid waste at the former nuclear weapons plant is being separated out into highly radioactive components, blended with glass to stabilize the material, then poured into 2-foot-tall stainless-steel containers spanning 10 feet in diameter. About 6,000 canisters will be needed to contain the high-level waste, Giusti said.

“We’re able to manage it, but I don’t think anyone envisioned us doing it forever,” he said. “We’re going to safely manage and store this material until we have a disposition path for it.”

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