

Trump's budget could help get rid of the nuclear waste along the San Onofre coastline

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A sense of momentum is building about finding a way to deal with the massive amounts of radioactive waste from nuclear power plants, including Southern California's San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station.

Last week's Trump administration ["skinny budget" proposal](#), which calls for boosts in defense spending but cuts in domestic funding and federal agencies, found \$120 million for starters to "initiate a robust interim storage program" while also looking at reviving the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository in Nevada.

"These investments would accelerate progress on fulfilling the federal government's obligations to address nuclear waste, enhance national security and reduce future taxpayer burden," a note said in the section reserved for the U.S. Department of Energy. (The [Energy Department's budget](#) came in for a 5.6% reduction.)

A president's budget proposals are ultimately subordinate to what Congress decides. But David Victor, chairman of the SONGS Community Engagement Panel, said the appropriation for nuclear waste may be one of the only topics in the current political environment that can generate support from members of both parties.

There are 3.6 million pounds of nuclear waste sitting along the coastline at the San Onofre plant, part of [the 76,000 metric tons](#) of spent fuel at sites nationwide.

“There’s a lot of Trump’s proposed budget that horrifies me, in particular around cutting funding for science and energy, but [long-term nuclear storage] is an area where I think the nation is now starting to make some progress,” Victor said.

Rep. [Darrell Issa](#) (R-Vista), who has [introduced a bill](#) called the Interim Consolidated Storage Act, said he thinks the chances for funding the White House nuclear waste proposal are “extremely good.”

“You have an active group of members, some of whom are Democratic members, who have a vested interest” in moving legislation forward, Issa said. “And ... the fingerprints of whoever wanted to force it out would show all over.”

A \$120-million appropriation is a tiny amount of money in relation to the entire federal budget, but supporters of consolidated interim storage said it would represent a show of resolve on the part of the federal government.

“As a budget line item it’s not a bad number at all,” Issa said in a telephone interview from Washington. “It’s sufficient to do the feasibility of these sites.”

Consolidated interim storage sites are designed to be built in isolated locations where multiple nuclear facilities could deposit their waste.

Two potential interim storage locations have been discussed — one in western Texas and another in eastern New Mexico.

A company in Andrews, Texas, has filed an application to accept 5,000 metric tons of nuclear material. The district is represented by Republican Rep. [Mike Conaway](#), who has co-sponsored Issa’s bill.

Getting the massive nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain, located about 100 miles from Las Vegas, back on track assuredly would involve a battle on Capitol Hill.

Democrats as well as Republicans from Nevada [blasted](#) the Trump proposal.

"Washington needs to understand what Nevada has been saying for years: We will not be the nation's nuclear waste dump," said Sen. [Dean Heller](#) (R-Nev.).

The federal government spent about \$15 billion to build the facility at Yucca Mountain to house nuclear waste from sites across the country. But then-Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.) led the fight to shut the repository down, and in 2010 President Obama suspended licensing for the site.

Yucca Mountain was scheduled to open in 2017.

While [taking a tour of San Onofre](#) last month with Issa, Rep. [John Shimkus](#) (R-Ill.), who is chairman of the House subcommittee that reviews nuclear sites, was asked if Yucca Mountain was coming back onto the bargaining table.

"It's never been off the table," Shimkus said.

Issa's bill would be paid for by using part of the federal government's Nuclear Waste Fund, which is worth upward of \$40 billion and was funded by ratepayers in areas powered by nuclear plants.

A 2014 court order stopped the federal government from taking fees from electricity customers because, with Yucca Mountain sidelined, the government had no place to send nuclear waste.

"We're paying a lot of money for the privilege of not having a solution that we were obligated to have," Issa said. "It's not free. It's going to cost every taxpayer money until there's a working solution."

But even if Congress adopts a plan roughly similar to the White House proposal, there are a series of practical and regulatory hurdles to clear.

For example, sites such as San Onofre, which closed in 2013, would still need to place some of their spent fuel into canisters. Then federal law would need to be changed to install a reliable funding mechanism for interim sites, and a strategy would need to be adopted in order to move the waste from one place to another.

“There is still a long way to go,” Victor said. “We could have troubles on any of those fronts, but I think what’s encouraging is that on every single one of those fronts, we’re starting to see progress.”

Millions of people live within 50 miles of San Onofre, which hasn’t produced electricity since January 2012 [after a steam generator](#) leaked a small amount of radiation.

Southern California Edison is the majority owner of the plant, which is in the process of being decommissioned.

Edison officials said they were heartened by the news of \$120-million proposal.

“We are pleased to see funding proposed to restart the Yucca licensing process, and continue to also support interim storage proposals that would enable [Southern California Edison] to move San Onofre’s used fuel to an off-site location,” spokeswoman Maureen Brown said.

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