

Testimony of Senator Dean Heller (R-NV)

Tuesday, September 26, 2017, at 2:00 PM

Before the House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform

Subcommittee on the Interior, Energy, and Environment

Hearing Entitled: “Examining America’s Nuclear Waste Management and Storage.”

Chairman Farenthold, Ranking Member Plaskett, Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony for the record for today’s hearing.

Since 1987, the Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Repository has been a thorn in Nevada’s side. Due to political antics, not science, Nevada quickly moved to the federal government’s number one targeted location to permanently store all of the nation’s nuclear waste. Our state has been fighting this misguided proposal ever since, and we’re not finished.

Although I recognize both the crucial role nuclear power plays in our nation’s long-term energy strategy and the need to properly store expired nuclear fuel, I remain strongly opposed to any efforts to restart licensing activities for Yucca Mountain. This ill-conceived project would not only cause significant harm to the well-being of my home state and all Nevadans, but also poses a national security risk that is too great to ignore. My position remains clear: Yucca Mountain is dead. I encourage this Subcommittee in today’s hearing to move past failed proposals of the past and look to solutions of the future.

We can all agree today that it is in the best interest of our nation that a program to dispose of and store spent nuclear fuel and high-level radioactive waste be implemented as soon as possible. Rather than attempting to force this project on the people of Nevada – a state that currently does not have any nuclear power plants of its own – I believe taxpayers’ dollars would be better spent identifying viable alternatives for the long-term storage of nuclear waste in areas that are willing to house it.

Failure to do so will only result in a waste of more taxpayer dollars and a delay in moving forward with any type of a lasting solution concerning the long-term management of high level nuclear while this issue is litigated by the State of Nevada. Governor Sandoval has made clear the State of Nevada will contest over 200 elements of any license application, which will take years to resolve and cost the federal government billions of dollars. This is in addition to the Department of Energy’s (DOE’s) estimates that an additional \$82 billion would be needed to license, litigate, build, operate, decommission, and eventually close Yucca Mountain. With respect to what has already been spent on the repository that adds up to more than \$96 billion for the total system life cycle cost for the project.

As a small government, fiscal conservative, I believe taxpayer dollars would be better spent identifying viable alternatives for the long-term storage of nuclear waste in areas that are willing to house it. In fact, 2012 DOE cost estimates show that all other costs being equal, walking away from Yucca Mountain, and starting with a new repository site in a deep salt bed or a deep shale formation, could save between \$12 billion and \$27 billion over the life of the repository. Before Congress spends any more U.S. taxpayer money on Yucca Mountain, I encourage this Subcommittee in its oversight efforts to ask the DOE what they have learned about repository costs in its previous studies. Furthermore, I believe we need new cost studies on geologic disposal in repositories, studies that include the lessons learned from recent progress with repositories in Europe.

With respect to the economic impact on the State of Nevada, moving forward with Yucca Mountain will cripple my state's tourism economy. Yucca Mountain is located just 90 miles from Las Vegas, Nevada - the world's premier tourist, convention, and entertainment destination. Last year, Las Vegas welcomed nearly 43 million visitors. Over the past decade, the Greater Las Vegas area has been one of the fastest growing in the U.S. with a population that now exceeds 2.1 million people according to an estimate from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Any issues with the transportation of nuclear waste to the site, or issues with storage there, would bring devastating consequences to the local, state, and national economies. Mr. Chairman, would you want to come to Las Vegas knowing that high level nuclear waste is being transported very likely through the heart of the strip?

But let me outline for you the vitally important role tourism plays for the Greater Las Vegas area. This industry accounts for close to 44 percent of local workforce, providing close to \$17 billion dollars in local wages and an estimated \$60 billion dollars in local impact. Without tourism, every household in Southern Nevada would pay close to \$3,000 more in taxes. That is a significant amount of money to individuals and families working to make ends meet.

And people visit not only as tourists, but as business professionals for conferences, meetings, and trade shows – generating another \$12 billion in local economic impact. Las Vegas has three of the 10 largest convention centers in North America, and has been the number one trade show destination for 23 consecutive years. This economic driver within the state is a critical component of another related industry that is vitally important to the state of Nevada, namely the gaming industry.

This industry in Nevada alone supports over 430,000 jobs, pays more than \$18 billion in wages, and generates close to \$8 billion in federal, state, and local tax revenues. Mr. Chairman, the reason I draw the Subcommittee's attention to these numbers is for the

fact that Yucca Mountain will have very real negative economic consequences for Nevadans.

This is due to the fact that we cannot guarantee that we can safely transport that volume of nuclear waste to Yucca Mountain without the threat of a transportation accident along the proposed routes. Under the Nuclear Waste Policy Act, we as a nation are looking at shipping 9,495 rail casks in 2,800 trains, and 2,650 trucks hauling one case each to Yucca Mountain over 50 years. If the capacity limit at Yucca is more than doubled as has been discussed, DOE would ship about 21,909 rail casks in about 6,700 trains 5,025 truck casks to Yucca Mountain.

I ask this Subcommittee, do you really believe that over the span of 50 years that there won't be one single transportation accident with an ensuing radiological release? And under DOE's proposal, these shipments would use 22,000 miles of railways and 7,000 miles of highways, crossing over 44 states and the tribal lands of at least 30 Native American Tribes, the District of Columbia, and 960 counties with a 2010 Census population of about 175 million. Between 10 and 12 million people live within the radiological region of influence for routine shipments. That is within one-half mile of these rail and highway routes. In effect, these rail and highway routes would impact most of the nation's congressional districts – estimates show close to 330 districts.

Moreover, if there was a spill or an accident, questions remain within the DOE regarding its response time for emergency radiological exposure. This is not to even mention the issue of private ownership of rail rights-of-way, making it uncertain who would even control accident sites.

What we do know is that the local communities would be the ones forced to suffer any type of long-term effects of radiation exposure. This is in a state that was home to our nation's nuclear test site, and the surrounding communities have suffered for years from resulting exposure. I ask this committee, should Nevadans be forced once more to shoulder this burden?

I believe that states, like Nevada, should have the ability to decide for themselves as opposed to having the federal government tell them what to do. Mr. Chairman, I come to the table today with a bipartisan, bicameral solution that ensures that states have a meaningful voice in this process.

My Nuclear Waste Informed Consent Act would allow for the construction of a nuclear waste repository only if the Secretary of Energy has secured written consent from the governor of the host state, affected units of local government, and affected Indian tribes. This is consistent with the consent-based siting initiative to site waste storage and disposal facilities initiated by the DOE in late 2015.

Identifying communities that are willing hosts for long-term repositories, rather than forcing it upon states, is the only viable solution to our nation's nuclear waste problem. I encourage this subcommittee to focus its efforts on that worthwhile initiative.

Failing to do so would just squander more time and resources that would be better spent pursuing viable solutions to this important public policy challenge.

Chairman Farenthold, Ranking Member Plaskett, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony today. I stand ready to partner with you to find a viable solution to this problem once and for all.