

Editorials

Editorial: Trump, Congress should open \$15B Yucca Mountain

By Albuquerque Journal Editorial Board

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The most radioactive news to come out of President-elect Donald Trump's camp might not involve beauty contestants or entertainment reporters or birth certificates from Hawaii.

It involves a hole in the Nevada desert.

U.S. taxpayers have invested more than \$15 billion over three decades for a final resting place for all of the spent nuclear fuel and high-level nuclear waste produced in the United States. And that investment has resulted in the most expensive and secure and empty underground parking garage in the form of Yucca Mountain, located in a remote part of Nevada between Las Vegas and Reno.

The planned underground repository for spent nuclear fuel from power plants was taken off the table by now-retiring Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., who made sure over his D.C. career there was not sufficient funding to process Yucca's Nuclear Regulatory Commission license application, or the political will to approve it.

(Reid's former staffer, Gregory Jaczko, chaired the Nuclear Regulatory Commission from 2009-2012; the Office of the Inspector General found Jaczko withheld information from the four other commissioners on Yucca, then unilaterally shut down a crucial safety review of the facility. President Barack Obama's administration cut off funding for Yucca in 2010.)

Utilities – or more accurately utility company customers – have already paid more than \$21 billion into a fund for the yet-to-be realized long-term storage. The U.S. Department of Energy is fined hundreds of millions of dollars annually for not disposing of the waste as promised. More than a dozen reactors need to be safely decommissioned. Aging power plants need to be relicensed. And more than 70,000 metric tons of highly radioactive nuclear waste has piled up and is now parked in above ground pools across the country at various nuclear power plants never designed for long-term storage.

Not exactly safe or desirable for material that takes thousands of years to degrade.

Under Reid's direction, with Obama's blessing, the federal government has gone back on Congress' 1982 legally binding pledge that the U.S. government is responsible for disposing of the radioactive material, and on its 1988 selection of Yucca Mountain as the storage destination.

Under the new Senate leadership, with the Trump administration's direction, the federal government could – and should – finally make good on those promises.

There are more than 70,000 safety reasons why.

Trump advisers are reportedly actively discussing getting Yucca back online.

Last week Reid declared efforts to revive Yucca Mountain are “doomed to fail” and threatened that trying is “going to be expensive and they'll get nothing for it.”

Nothing is what American taxpayers have received for their \$15 billion spent to date – nothing, that is, except less-secure storage of nuclear waste.

And congressional leaders and the incoming administration should change that.

This editorial first appeared in the Albuquerque Journal. It was written by members of the editorial board and is unsigned as it represents the opinion of the newspaper rather than the writers.