

Editorial: Revive Yucca Mountain: Illinois has more nuclear waste than any other state, all of it in temporary storage



The Yucca Mountain nuclear waster storage facility in Nevada is back in the news with President Donald Trump's budget proposal including \$120 million to revive the project. (Isaac Breecken / AP 2006)

By: [Editorial Board](#)

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It has been 30 years since Congress designated Nevada's Yucca Mountain as the secure site for the nation's nuclear waste. Since then, taxpayers have coughed up \$11 billion creating a repository 1,000 feet underground that would keep the radioactive refuse permanently sealed off. As yet, it's still empty. But that could finally change.

Yucca Mountain is in a remote section of the Mojave Desert. But many people in Nevada didn't want the waste, no matter how safe or isolated the storage facility may be. It was the ultimate NIMBY project. One of those opponents, alas, was [Harry Reid](#), who for 10 years was Senate Democratic leader and in a position to get his way. As president, [Barack Obama](#) gave Reid exactly what he wanted, closing down the entire effort.

Obama's capitulation defied scientific evidence as well as common sense. A study released by the [Nuclear Regulatory Commission](#) in 2014 concluded that the design met all of the agency's requirements. The "proposed repository as designed will be capable of safely isolating used nuclear fuel and high-level radioactive waste for the 1-million-year period specified in the regulations," the NRC said. That's right: 1 million years.

But the technical merits of the facility were, regrettably, beside the point. In 2011, the nonpartisan federal Government Accountability Office found that the Obama administration's "decision to terminate the Yucca Mountain repository was made for policy reasons, not technical or safety reasons."

Now that decision stands to be reversed, as it should be. Energy Secretary Rick Perry toured the facility in March, and President [Donald Trump](#)'s budget plan includes \$120 million to revive the project. With Reid finally retired and Republicans in control of Congress, now is the time to get it done.

The 79,000 tons of existing nuclear waste, after all, have to be stashed somewhere. Right now, that somewhere consists of dozens of sites across the country, including the mothballed plant in Zion. Illinois has more of the spent fuel than any other state — including 1,000 tons at Zion, on the shore of Lake Michigan.

These facilities are much less secure and permanent than Yucca Mountain is designed to be. And instead of confining the material to one tiny portion of

one state, they leave it scattered over 34 states, with each site requiring constant expense and vigilance.

This haphazard approach makes no sense from the standpoint of safety or security. On the contrary, it creates unnecessary risk of environmental disasters and terrorist attacks — unlike the formidably impregnable Yucca Mountain. It has also wasted huge sums of money, because the federal government has had to pay those utilities that have been forced to store the spent fuel — a tab expected to approach \$25 billion. And it stands in the way of expanding nuclear power, which ought to be a priority today as a method of generating electricity without producing greenhouse gases.

Local opponents referred to the 1987 measure designating Yucca Mountain for the nation's nuclear waste as "The Screw Nevada Act." In fact, the danger to the state was pure fantasy, and the economic benefits were real.

Yucca Mountain is the only viable alternative to the jury-rigged status quo. We hope the Trump administration and Congress will revive it. Because if they don't, we're all screwed.

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