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Yucca Mountain- Could the end be near?

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It has been 25 years since the signing of the Nuclear Waste Policy Act that set the nation on a course to site and develop an underground facility to permanently isolate the long-lived radioactive wastes from commercial nuclear power reactors and atomic weapons production. It has been 20 years since Congress deliberately collapsed the candidate site screening process of the Act and, through an exercise of raw political power, named Yucca Mountain, Nevada, as the only site to be studied for the disposal facility that no state wanted forced on it. It has been 10 years since the 1998 date the Act set for the federal government to begin receiving radioactive waste for permanent disposal. Now, the best projected opening date, according to the Department of Energy, is at least 2, and probably more, years beyond the 2017 date promised until earlier this year by the DOE program director. It has been almost 6 years since Congress overrode the Governor of Nevada’s veto of the Secretary of Energy’s recommendation that Yucca Mountain be developed as the nation’s high-level nuclear waste disposal site.

While some believe that it is inevitable that the federal government will prevail at Yucca Mountain, the majority of Nevadans have remained stalwart in their opposition to the project for at least the past 20 years. Reasons for opposition are numerous, ranging from the physical inability of the site to isolate the waste from the environment and people, to the risk to health and safety and Nevada’s economy of transporting the waste to Yucca Mountain, to the development and use of Yucca Mountain for nuclear waste disposal being a violation of the Treaty of Ruby Valley between the Shoshone Nation and the U.S. government. Proponents of the Yucca Mountain project have claimed that it is necessary to revitalize and expand the nuclear power industry which now has 103 operating commercial reactors spread across 35 states. Nevada has no nuclear power reactors.

The current status of the project is one of uncertainty. The Director’s promised June 30, 2008 submittal of a license application to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to construct the facility recently has been delayed, though the Director says possibly by only a few months. The Act required that the application be submitted 90 days after the Secretary of Energy’s site recommendation, which was in February, 2002. And, after being remanded to the Environmental Protection Agency nearly 4 years ago, there is still no final radiation protection standard that Yucca Mountain must meet in order for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to review and approve a Yucca Mountain license application. Adding to the uncertainty is Congress’ having cut DOE’s funding for the project this year by over twenty percent.

Opposition to the Yucca Mountain Project is growing nationally among political decision-makers for the first time in 20 years. Could the end be near?