

New Yucca Mountain head: Interim storage may not be needed

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WASHINGTON (AP)

The new head of the government's Yucca Mountain nuclear waste dump has doubts about a Senate plan for temporary storage of highly radioactive nuclear waste pending completion of Yucca.

"I'm not saying it can't be done but it's going to be a challenge," Edward F. "Ward" Sproat, director of the Energy Department's Office of Civilian Radioactive Waste Management, told reporters Wednesday. Sproat, a former nuclear industry executive, also said that if Yucca Mountain opens in Nevada in 2017 -- a new completion date announced this week -- there may be no need for interim storage anyway.

"The timeframes needed to design, license and probably litigate a centralized or several centralized storage facilities" could likely stretch to 2017, Sproat said.

Yucca Mountain, 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas, is supposed to be the first national repository for nuclear waste. It's meant to hold 77,000 tons of the material for thousands of years.

But a series of problems including lawsuits and funding shortfalls have delayed the project, and more than 50,000 tons of nuclear waste is now piling up at nuclear power plants in 31 states, with nowhere to go. The government is facing mounting legal liability because it was contractually obligated to begin storing the material starting in 1998.

That's led some in Congress to push for interim storage sites. The Senate Appropriations Committee has approved a plan by Energy Committee Chairman

Pete Domenici, R-N.M., that would allow the government to store nuclear waste for up to 25 years at federal sites across the country that could open five or six years from now.

Domenici said Tuesday that even with the new 2017 deadline his plan still is needed, because "we must do something now to meet this obligation."

While questioning the interim storage plan, Sproat said the mounting liability to utilities -- estimated to reach \$7 billion by 2017 -- needed to be addressed.

Some utilities already have filed lawsuits -- and won favorable rulings in the courts -- claiming the government owes them millions of dollars for failing to take their waste.

While in the private sector Sproat was the lead negotiator in a nuclear waste settlement that Exelon Corp. reached with the Energy Department in 2004. He said he wanted to renew discussions with utilities on settlement agreements that might limit the government's liability.

Sproat also said that the Energy Department will not be able to achieve the new March 31, 2017, deadline to open Yucca unless Congress approves a package of legislative reforms that would increase the waste storage capacity at Yucca, ensure a steady funding stream and make other changes.

-- Published in the Casper (Wyoming) Star-Tribune
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