

Plans To Bury Nuclear Waste In NV Drawing Fire

KEN RITTER, Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Federal plans to truck radioactive material from a World War II-era plant in Tennessee to Nevada for burial in the desert are rekindling a long-running battle to prevent the Silver State from becoming the nation's nuclear dumping ground.

U.S. Department of Energy officials told residents at a town hall meeting Wednesday in Las Vegas that the state doesn't have authority to prevent shipments of uranium waste from Oak Ridge, Tenn., to the Nevada National Security Site north of Las Vegas.

A similar meeting was scheduled late Thursday in rural Pahrump.

Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval, who protested the waste transport and burial plan when it became public last summer, issued a statement Thursday calling it premature to say whether the state will seek a federal court order to block the shipments.

Sandoval aide Mary-Sarah Kinner pointed to continuing talks between state and Energy Department to address concerns about the plan.

Energy Department administrators said they've revised transportation plans, agreed to bury the waste deeper than initially planned, and performed evaluations "above and beyond regulatory requirements" to address state concerns, including the safety of the waste for 10,000 years.

A truck was loaded at Oak Ridge in June, and officials told residents in Las Vegas they want to begin shipments under armed guard in January, before the trip certification expires. Up to 100 shipments would follow before 2017. Shipping times and routes would be kept secret.

The delay is costing \$2.5 million a month, department spokeswoman Aoife McCarthy said.

Tracy Mustin, a deputy to Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz, declared Wednesday that moving the potentially deadly material some 2,000 miles was "necessary and in the interest of national security."

"We're confident that we can execute the program safely and securely," Mustin said.

The assurances brought criticism from several of the 80 or so people who attended Wednesday's town hall meeting, including veterans of the decades-long battle that

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has so far blocked a plan to entomb waste from nuclear plants in tunnels at Yucca Mountain, about 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

Yucca Mountain is at the western edge of the former Nevada Test Site weapons proving ground, more than 30 miles from the proposed burial spot at the southeast corner of the renamed Nevada National Security Site.

Judy Treichel, executive director of the Nevada Nuclear Waste Task Force and a longtime Yucca Mountain project opponent, noted that the waste began as nuclear fuel in the 1960s at the Indian Point nuclear reactor on New York's Hudson River.

She said she suspected the Energy Department improperly downgraded the material to low-level nuclear waste to make disposal easier.

A project administrator, Frank Marcinowski, responded that the material had been processed to make it more stable.

It doesn't qualify as high-level waste, Marcinowski said, and there was no reason to continue to store it in Tennessee because it had been deemed unusable for industrial, research or weapon production.

The waste is contained in 403 solid metal canisters the size of a fat baseball bat or oversized umbrella. The containers would be buried in trenches below a 40-foot level at which a layer of shipping containers filled with radioactively contaminated materials ranging from worker uniforms to machine parts would be stacked. An 8-foot layer of dirt would top the site.

Marcinowski called the burial site ideal due to its remoteness, 24-hour National Security Site guard, scarce rainfall and groundwater level at 750 feet below the surface.

Senate Democratic Majority Leader Harry Reid, a leader of the years-long fight to block and defund the Yucca Mountain project, said in a statement Thursday that he wasn't convinced the Oak Ridge waste should be sent to Nevada.

"I'm pleased that DOE and the governor's office continue discussions on this proposal," he said.

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