

Nation

Nevada says nuclear-waste fight will continue

By Martin Kasindorf
USA TODAY

Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham recommended Thursday that 77,000 tons of highly radioactive waste from the nation's nuclear power plants be deposited under Nevada's Yucca Mountain, 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

Abraham's conclusion that the remote desert site is "scientifically sound" and "important to our national security" ignited a storm of protest from Nevada politicians and environmental groups and gambling interests.

"This decision stinks," said Nevada Gov. Kenny Guinn, a Republican.

Led by elected officials from both major parties, critics vowed to step up their 20-year fight against the \$58 billion project by pressing President Bush, Congress or the courts to kill it. "We've got a legal strategy, a public relations strategy and a congressional strategy," Nevada Attorney General Frankie Sue Del Papa said. "The bottom line is that the Yucca Mountain project should be indefinitely postponed."

Abraham called the burial ground on federal land an anti-terrorism measure

that would move wastes now stored at 131 locations to "one underground location that is far from population centers."

Welcoming Abraham's move, the Nuclear Energy Institute, the Washington lobbying group for the nuclear power industry, said it is "the right scientific thing to do."

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce called it "a decisive step forward."

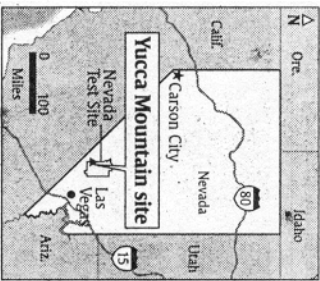
Opponents, too, grounded their positions on anti-terrorism. They cited possible attacks on trucks carrying waste to the site. "This is a dirty nuclear bomb on 18 wheels waiting to happen," said Nathan Naylor, press secretary for Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev.

Many Nevadans also fear damage to the state's image and tourism-

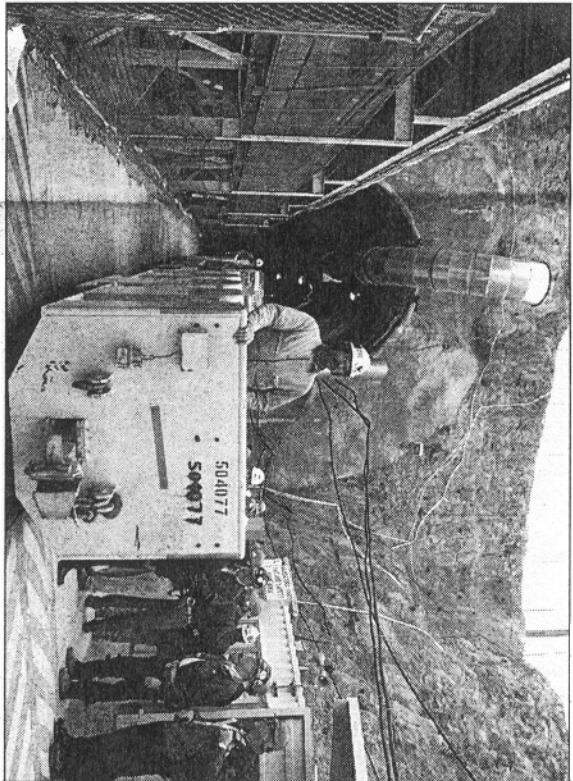
based economy. "We got a very good smattering of it Sept. 11," said Stephen Cloodbeck, owner of three hotels on the Las Vegas Strip. "Everyone lost 50% of revenues."

Reid said Abraham was ignoring a critical report released Dec. 21 by Congress' General Accounting Office. The report said a decision on the site's suitability would be "premature" because 293 scientific ques-

tions about safety were still unanswered.



USA TODAY



By Joe Cavertta, AP

Cavern entrance: Nuclear waste would be stored about 1,000 feet below the ground at Yucca Mountain in the Nevada desert. Deposits wouldn't begin until at least 2010.

Spent pellets from reactor fuel rods used at the nation's 103 nuclear power plants contain elements that will remain lethally radioactive for 10,000 years. Opponents of the Yucca Mountain project say that until science finds a way to neutralize the waste, it is safer where it is now — in

pools of water and concrete casks at commercial power plants and Energy Department facilities in 39 states.

In 1982, Congress ordered the Energy

Department to find a geologically stable deep-disposal site. The law was amended in 1987 to make Yucca Mountain the only site to be considered. The mountain sits on the western edge of the Nevada Test Site, where nuclear weapons were tested for four decades.

The next step is up to Bush. If he recommends Yucca Mountain to Congress, Nevada has 60 days to veto the project. Majority votes in both houses of Congress could

override that veto. Then, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission would decide whether to license the repository. That process would take three to four years. Deposits of waste would not begin until at least 2010.

"I think it's an uphill battle for us in Congress," Reid said. He didn't share the optimism of other Nevada leaders that the state's four-member congressional delegation could derail the project. Nevada plans to build support in Congress with a \$5.5 million, state-financed national advertising and public-relations campaign that would emphasize the danger of terrorist attacks on waste-hauling trucks.

Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, D-S.D., supports the Nevada delegation's bipartisan stand against Yucca Mountain. He said last year that he would use parliamentary maneuvers to keep an override measure from reaching the Senate floor. But Reid said Daschle "doesn't have the statutory authority to do that."

Las Vegas Mayor Oscar Goodman said he'll try to build support among mayors of cities that waste trucks would pass through. The federal courts have been an arena of battle for years. Three lawsuits by Nevada against the federal government to stall the project are in full swing. Bob Loux, Guinn's top aide for nuclear waste issues, said two more will be filed if Bush goes along with Abraham. Goodman said Las Vegas will file its own lawsuit.

The White House regarded the issue as so sensitive that Karl Rove, the president's top political adviser, gave Guinn a heads-up phone call Thursday. Polls consistently show that 80% of Nevadans don't want a repository they call a nuclear "dump."