

Mr. President, Heed Your Own Words:

Yucca Mountain's Viability Should be Based on Science, Not Politics

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If President Obama plans to live up to his promise of “science over politics” in determining policy, he will not discontinue funding for a nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain, Nevada.

Between 1982 and 2009 the federal government collected nearly \$31 billion in fees and interest from electric utility ratepayers for the express purpose of disposing of used nuclear fuel. Just when it appeared this country had a viable solution, the president eliminated funding for the Yucca Mountain project for apparently no other reason other than ‘because I said so’.

When Mr. Obama assumed office a year ago, he said his administration would be based on the precepts of transparency, the rule of law, and preserving the integrity of science in public policy making. “Executive departments and agencies should ... put information about their operations and decisions online and readily available to the public,” he said, vowing to base decisions on science, not politics.

With the facility nearly complete and studies indicating that a Yucca Mountain repository, built beneath a barren ridge in the Mohave Desert, would meet stringent Environmental Protection Agency standards for public safety, the president's fiscal year 2010 budget stripped all funding from the project except the bare minimum required to review the license application. The trade press now reports that the FY2011 Department of Energy (DOE) budget request will zero out the budget and DOE will withdraw the license application. Terminating the project now will short-circuit the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's ongoing independent safety review of the DOE application. Instead a “Blue Ribbon Commission” will study the issue – with the

rumored caveat that the commission will not be allowed to consider a Yucca Mountain repository as a potential solution.

Why? The law of the land – the Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982 – calls for a repository at Yucca Mountain if it proves to be safe. In addition to commercial used fuel, nuclear waste from national defense operations would be disposed of at the site. Despite repeated requests from Congress and others, the administration has offered no rationale for its actions and intentions. It is apparent the answer lies in politics, not science. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada is a staunch opponent of the project. How is that consistent with making decisions based on objective science?

The commercial nuclear industry has proven that it can store used fuel safely at nuclear power plants for a very long time. However, something eventually must be done with it. Moreover, electric utility customers are now paying twice for used fuel – first to cover the waste fee, and again to store used fuel at reactor sites long after the federal government should have disposed of it.

The government's failure to accomplish anything with the \$31 billion already collected for the repository has resulted in a financial liability to all taxpayers – not just ratepayers - will reach \$12.3 billion by 2020, and will continue to grow \$500 million for each additional year of delay. The Obama administration plan for nuclear waste – essentially starting over – ensures that the taxpayer will be paying those costs for decades.

Nuclear power produces electricity safely, economically and without generating greenhouse gases. Like all means of energy production, nuclear power produces waste, but the volume of used fuel is relatively small. The technology of geologic disposal of nuclear waste is sound and proven. The waste problem is not one of technology, but of political will.

By all means go forward with the Blue Ribbon Commission and study the various alternatives for nuclear waste disposal. However, all reasonable alternatives eventually require a geologic repository for commercial used fuel (or its reprocessed waste) and defense waste. The only sensible action at this point is to complete the licensing process and keep the Yucca Mountain option open if it proves to be safe. In doing so,

the Obama Administration would live up to its own lofty words about transparency, rule of law, and basing decisions on science rather than politics.

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The NWSC is an ad hoc group of state utility regulators, state attorneys general, electric utilities and associate members representing 47 member/affiliate organizations in 31 states, committed to reforming and adequately funding the U.S. civilian high-level nuclear waste transportation, storage, and disposal program.