

# Congress group tours Yucca Mountain nuke dump site in Nevada

April 10 2015, by Ken Ritter

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Dean Stucker, of the Department of Energy, sits in an all-terrain vehicle near the north portal of Yucca Mountain during a congressional tour Thursday, April 9, 2015, near Mercury, Nev. Several members of Congress toured the proposed radioactive waste dump 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas. (AP Photo/John Locher)

Six members of Congress toured a dusty tunnel and stood atop Yucca Mountain on Thursday during a trip led by a colleague who said the nondescript rocky ridge in the wind-swept desert outside Las Vegas would

be a good place to entomb highly radioactive waste piling up at reactors around the country.

Rep. John Shimkus, R-Ill., head of an energy and commerce subcommittee, invoked the 1982 Nuclear Waste Policy Act and a declaration by Congress in 2002 that the wind-swept rocky ridge 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas was suitable for the task.

"We just have to move the process forward," he said.

U.S. Rep. Dan Newhouse, a Republican whose home district includes the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Washington state, said he was impressed by his first visit to Yucca Mountain. He called it "the best alternative I know of" for storing waste dating to the Manhattan Project and development of the first atomic bomb during World War II.

U.S. Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nevada, didn't make the trip. He derided it instead as "a disingenuous, political sideshow" aimed at building support for a project that residents and elected officials in his home state have opposed for decades and still don't want.

If the trip's organizers were interested in fact-finding, they would have invited experts from the state to participate, Heller said.

"Nevadans have made their intentions clear," he said in a statement. "No amount of political pomp and circumstance will change that."



Rep. John Shimkus, R-Ill., stands near the north portal of Yucca Mountain during a congressional tour Thursday, April 9, 2015, near Mercury, Nev. Several members of Congress toured the proposed radioactive waste dump 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas. (AP Photo/John Locher)

The tour and the political jousting came a few weeks after one of the nuclear dump project's staunchest opponents, U.S. Sen. Harry Reid, announced he'll retire after 2016.

Nevada's newest congressman, Republican U.S. Rep. Cresent Hardy, said after emerging from the tunnel that he's willing to consider supporting the project if Nevada gains benefits like schools, roads and water resources in return.

"It's back to the same place I was," he said. "Let's have a conversation."

Rep. Mark Amodei, another Nevada Republican, said no one wants a nuclear dump, but Nevada should listen.

Shimkus said the trip didn't signal a resumption of the Yucca Mountain program because Congress never stopped it. "You can't restart something that hasn't officially ended," Shimkus said.

Estimates are that \$15 billion was spent drilling a 5-mile U-shaped tunnel and studying whether 77,000 tons of hazardous material could remain safe and dry in casks wheeled on rails into a honeycomb of tunnels 1,000 feet underground. Some estimates put the final cost at \$100 billion.



Dean Stucker, of the Department of Energy, drives an all-terrain vehicle during a congressional tour through Yucca Mountain, Thursday, April 9, 2015, near Mercury, Nev. Several members of Congress toured the proposed radioactive waste dump 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas. (AP Photo/John Locher)

Congress cut off funding after Reid became Senate majority leader in 2007. Under President Barack Obama, the Energy Department shuttered the project and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission halted the licensing process.

A federal court in 2013 ordered the commission to resume licensing, and agency staff in January released a report that appeared to provide wiggle room for adopting rules to open the repository.

"The studies have been done," said Rep. Bob Latta, R-Ohio. "Going forward, we have to make a decision."



Rep. Dan Newhouse, R-Wash., from left, Department of Energy official William Boyle, Rep. Jerry McNerney, D-Calif., Rep. Bob Latta, R-Ohio, Rep. Crescent Hardy, R-Nev., and Rep. John Shimkus, R-Ill., tour Yucca Mountain,

Thursday, April 9, 2015, near Mercury, Nev. Several members of Congress toured the proposed radioactive waste dump 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas. (AP Photo/John Locher)

Rep. Jerry McNerney of California, the lone Democrat on the tour, pointed to the cost and effort spent studying the site and said the nation needs to consider using nuclear power as a clean energy source..

"If it's a scientifically viable site. It's a shame to shut it down politically," McNerney said. But Nevada has to be willing to accept the project if it is to succeed, he said.



Dean Stucker, of the Department of Energy, holds a light near an all-terrain vehicle during a congressional tour through Yucca Mountain, Thursday, April 9, 2015, near Mercury, Nev. Several members of Congress toured the proposed radioactive waste dump 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas. (AP Photo/John

Locher)



People walk into the south portal of Yucca Mountain during a congressional tour Thursday, April 9, 2015, near Mercury, Nev. Several members of Congress toured the proposed radioactive waste dump 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas. (AP Photo/John Locher)



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People walk in a tunnel through Yucca Mountain during a congressional tour Thursday, April 9, 2015, near Mercury, Nev. Several members of Congress toured the proposed radioactive waste dump 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas. (AP Photo/John Locher)



Congressmen, including Jerry McNerney, D-Calif., left, and Rep. John Shimkus, R-Ill., second from left, tour Yucca Mountain, Thursday, April 9, 2015, near Mercury, Nev. Several members of Congress toured the proposed radioactive waste dump 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas. (AP Photo/John Locher)

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