

NUCLEAR WASTE

House panel approves bipartisan Yucca Mountain bill

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House Environment and Climate Change Subcommittee Chairman Paul Tonko (D-N.Y.) during a markup this morning. Francis Chung/E&E News

Bipartisan legislation looking to take an all-hands approach to breaking the nation's nuclear waste logjam cleared an Energy and Commerce subcommittee this morning on a voice vote.

While committee leaders from both sides expressed support for the bill, at least one member — who previously backed the measure last Congress — expressed reservations today in a sign of the bill's uphill climb.

"It remains clear now that the bill last year and now H.R. 2699 does not represent the most expeditious path to removing spent fuel from our communities," said Rep. Doris Matsui (D-Calif.), who co-sponsored the legislation last year. "Tying interim storage to a final decision on Yucca Mountain is just not realistic."

The legislation, [H.R. 2699](#), from Reps. Jerry McNerney (D-Calif.) and John Shimkus (R-Ill.) passed the House 340-72 last Congress, but it ultimately stalled in the Senate over Nevada lawmaker opposition.

Despite bipartisan support, the political calculus has changed. Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), who opposed the bill last year, has vowed to prevent any measure to boost Yucca Mountain from receiving a floor vote.

"I want to thank Subcommittee Chair Paul Tonko and really Chairman Frank Pallone, he's really doing something courageous here," Shimkus said. "I recognize that, and I'm personally thankful."

Among its provisions, the bill would jump-start the Yucca Mountain licensing process with a series of actions to better prepare the government's pending review before the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

The bill would also authorize the consolidated storage of nuclear waste in interim facilities. In addition, it would authorize a series of financial and infrastructure incentives for states to attract communities to participate as consent-based host sites.

"This represents the best path forward for getting the nation to a decision on safety licensing, which is necessary for public understanding of the science and engineering behind the Yucca site and for confidence in our nuclear waste program," said ranking member Greg Walden (R-Ore.).

More than 80,000 metric tons of nuclear waste sits at 121 sites across the country after the federal government has failed to find a workable disposal strategy for nuclear waste.

For decades that approach has been Yucca Mountain, but the Obama administration canceled the project in 2010 over concerns about strong state opposition to the site.

The legislation's two-tiered approach has united members from both sides of the aisle, especially for lawmakers who want to move waste as quickly as possible from reactor sites that have facilities no longer producing power.

"Communities across the country are expressing frustration as more and more nuclear plants close, but there is no real national solution to moving the spent fuel to a centralized interim storage facility or permanent repository," said Pallone (D-N.J.) in support of the bill.

"Whether it is a general safety concern, or the desire of the community to redevelop the land currently housing the spent fuel, it is critical that we find a path forward to begin the process of moving nuclear waste out of these communities," he added.

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