

LAS VEGAS SUN

Road study commissioned, just in case

Commission to argue that transportation to nuclear dump threatens public

By Joe Schoenmann

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The new administration in Washington has assured Nevadans that they can relax — the unopened nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain will stay that way.

President Barack Obama has moved to cut the project's funding, which had risen to about \$10 billion since Congress selected the site in 1987.

Still, the Energy Department filed a license application for the project in June 2008. So despite the assurances of Yucca Mountain's demise, local officials say the fight continues until the place is turned into a museum or is sealed altogether.

To that end, the Clark County Commission last week approved a multi-faceted study of transportation safety in Clark County. Funding for the first year of the study, costing \$200,000, will come from the Energy Department.

The repository is designed to hold 77,000 tons of waste that would be trucked and hauled in by rail — with many shipments traveling through the heart of Las Vegas — from 121 sites across the United States. The concern locally focuses on potential accidents and spills.

What does the \$200,000 for the study pay for?

It will buy the services of Urban Transit LLC, which has worked on policy and transportation planning issues for the county's Nuclear Waste Division since 2006. The county says Urban Transport "will provide all needed support for Clark County's transportation related contentions" to be considered by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which will decide whether the application for the repository should go forward.

That includes a study of rail and truck corridors through Clark County that could be used to haul high-level nuclear waste and spent nuclear fuel to Yucca Mountain.

More specifically, what will the studies look at?

One county contention is that the Energy Department didn't do a good job assessing the threat to public safety that would result from trucking hazardous waste through Clark County.

Previous studies have used "secondary source data," or information taken from second-party or archival sources, said Ron Cameron, project manager for Urban Transit.

With this study, the UNLV Transportation Research Center is going to work with the Nevada Highway Patrol to detail what is currently being hauled into and out of Clark County. They will conduct their “commodity flow assessments” at weigh stations near Mesquite and at the state’s southern borders with California and Arizona.

What do they expect that to yield, other than impatient truckers?

New information that can be compared with the previous “secondary source” studies, which the county has challenged.

So what have these previous studies said about the safety of transporting nuclear material through Southern Nevada?

In September 2008 federal regulators used the studies to paint a picture to a U.S. Senate committee “of a clean safety record for transporting nuclear materials,” according to the Inside NRC newsletter.

How else will learning what is shipped through Clark County help?

Having an overall picture of the hazardous materials rumbling along county roads will give authorities an idea of what the county deals with on a regular basis — to say nothing of what it would have to deal with if Yucca Mountain were approved, Cameron said. Officials of the Energy Department have said that 320 rail cars carrying nuclear material, or about two to three cars per week, would be shipped to Yucca Mountain over 25 years. Another 90 truckloads of material would be shipped annually.

You mean 320 rail cars a year, provided that the rail lines are safe?

That brings up another aspect of the study. Working with the Regional Transportation Commission and the county’s Comprehensive Planning and Public Works departments, Urban Transit will examine the effect of rail and truck shipments on “turnouts, bridges, overpasses, tunnels, road-bearing capability, congestion and accident rates.”

When is this study to be completed?

Cameron said it should be finished by the end of this year.

The county contract with Urban Transit, however, runs through June 30, 2010, and can be renewed annually for the next four years.