

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 30, 2007

The Honorable Harry Reid  
Majority Leader  
528 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Barbara Boxer  
Chairman  
Committee on Environment and Public Works  
410 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Leader Reid and Chairman Boxer:

I understand that the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee is holding a hearing on October 31 entitled, "Examination of the Licensing Process for the Yucca Mountain Repository," at which Senator Reid is scheduled to testify. I know both of you have been working on this issue for many years, so I am writing to share my perspective on the issue given its importance to my home state of Illinois. Although I am no longer a member of the EPW Committee, I respectfully offer the following views and ask that they be included as part of the hearing record. Separately, I will be submitting questions for the hearing witnesses.

Given the nation's rising energy demand and the serious problems posed by global climate change, we need to increase the use of carbon-free energy sources, such as solar, wind, and geothermal energy. But we cannot deny that nuclear power is – and likely will remain – an important source of electricity for many years to come. How we deal with the dangerous byproduct of nuclear reactors is a critical question that has yet to be resolved.

As you may know, Illinois has 11 nuclear reactors – more than any other state in the country. Nuclear power provides more than 50 percent of the electricity needs of Illinois. Where and how we store spent nuclear fuel is an extremely important issue for my constituents. Currently, in the absence of any alternative, spent nuclear fuel generated by Illinois' reactors is stored in Illinois.

In 1987, Congress attempted to reach a national solution to the storage of spent nuclear fuel and other radioactive waste by abandoning the scientific consideration of a wide range of possible sites and instead unilaterally imposing a final decision to focus only on Yucca Mountain, Nevada. During the past 20 years, over the strong opposition of the people of Nevada, billions of dollars have been spent by taxpayers and ratepayers in the construction of this location. Millions of dollars have been spent on lawsuits, and hundreds of millions more will be spent in the future if the Department of Energy fails to meet its contractual obligations to nuclear utilities.

Proponents suggest Yucca Mountain will not be ready to accept spent fuel shipments for another 10 years; more realistic prognostications suggest we are at least two decades from Yucca Mountain accepting shipments.

Legitimate scientific questions have been raised about the safety of storing spent nuclear fuel at this location. With regard to Yucca Mountain, the National Academy of Sciences maintains that peak risks might occur hundreds of thousands of years from now. In 2004, a federal court questioned whether standards developed by the Environmental Protection Agency for the Yucca Mountain repository were sufficient to guarantee the safety of Nevadans.

Questions also have been raised about the viability of transporting spent nuclear fuel to Nevada from different locations around the country. Although it would seem to serve the interests of Illinois – and other states with nuclear reactors – to send our waste to another state, transporting nuclear waste materials poses uncertain risk. In fact, since a large amount of this spent fuel would likely travel by rail, this is a serious concern for the people of Chicago, which is the transportation hub of the Midwest.

Because of these safety issues and the unwavering opposition from the people of Nevada and their elected officials, there is strong reason to believe that many more billions of dollars could be expended on Yucca Mountain without any significant progress in moving towards a permanent solution to the problem of where to store spent nuclear fuel.

For these reasons, I believe that it is no longer a sustainable federal policy for Yucca Mountain to be considered as a permanent repository. Instead of re-examining the 20-year licensing process and the billions of dollars that have already been spent, the time has come for the federal government to refocus its resources on finding more viable alternatives for the storage of spent nuclear fuel. Among the possible alternatives that should be considered are finding another state willing to serve as a permanent national repository or creating regional storage repositories. The federal government should also redirect resources toward improving the safety and security of spent fuel at plant sites around the country until a safe, long-term solution can be implemented.

Regardless of what alternative is pursued, two premises should guide federal decision-making. First, any storage option should be supported by sound science. We need to ensure that nuclear waste can be safely stored without polluting aquifers or soil and exposing nearby residents to toxic radiation.

Second, we should select a repository location through a process that develops national consensus and respects state sovereignty, not one in which the federal government cuts off debate and forces one state to accept nuclear waste from other states. The flawed process by which Yucca Mountain was selected now manifests itself as a profoundly expensive endeavor of monumental proportion.

In short, the selection of Yucca Mountain has failed, the time for debate on this site is over, and it is time to start exploring new alternatives for safe, long-term solutions based on

sound science. I thank you both for your leadership on this issue, and I appreciate your consideration of my views.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Barack Obama', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Barack Obama  
United States Senator