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Nuke agency resumes Yucca Mountain review

Julian Hatter, The Hill

November 18, 2013

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The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) has ordered its staff to get back to work finalizing a review of a controversial nuclear waste dump in Nevada.

On Monday, the agency announced that it had restarted work on a safety evaluation report for the Yucca Mountain site and also asked the Energy Department to prepare an additional environmental impact statement.

The decision to restart work on the site comes three months after the powerful U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit ordered the agency to decide on a license application from the Energy Department.

"The Commission reached this decision after obtaining views from numerous parties involved in the licensing process as to how it should proceed," NRC public affairs officer Dave McIntyre wrote in an agency blog post.

The safety evaluation report is "the key technical document" for the NRC's review, he added. One of its five planned volumes was published in 2010, before the review was stalled.

After the report is finished, the NRC would need to restart an adjudicatory hearing and perform additional reviews before reaching a decision, McIntyre said.

Multiple Republican lawmakers had urged the agency to get back to work on the review.

In October, six GOP senators led by Sen. Jeff Session (R-Ala.) wrote to the NRC Chairwoman Allison Macfarlane urging it to "proceed promptly" to finish the safety evaluations.

In its September ruling, the court declared that the NRC violated existing law when it halted its review of the dump site in 2011. The court decision was a setback for President Obama, who personally pledged to halt the process during his 2008 presidential campaign.

Nevadans, including Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.), have opposed using the site, which is about 100 miles outside of Las Vegas, to store nuclear waste. They say that Yucca Mountain is not safe for long-term storage and that a state should have the ultimate say in whether the project goes forward.

The NRC has maintained that it does not have enough money to finish its review of the potential waste site. House Republicans have voted to expand its budget to finish the survey, but those appropriations were never adopted.

As of Sept. 30, the NRC had \$11 million for the review, it said.

GOP appropriators urge budget deal -- soon

David Rogers, Politico

November 18, 2013

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The thirteen top Republicans on the House Appropriations Committee joined in a letter Monday urging budget negotiators to "redouble" their efforts and report a top-line number for discretionary spending before Thanksgiving -- or no later than Dec. 2.

"If a timely agreement is not reached, the likely alternatives could have extremely damaging repercussions," warns the letter. It is addressed to the House and Senate Budget committees but appears aimed too at Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio), who faces pressure to take a more active role if the talks continue to drift with no resolution in sight.

House Appropriations Committee Chairman Hal Rogers (R-Ky.) led in organizing the letter. But all 12 of his subcommittee chairs signed on as well, and while typically loyal to Boehner, they represent a serious power bloc if they should ever decide to stand up for themselves and show some muscle.

"The failure to reach a budget deal to allow Appropriations to assemble funding for 2014 will reopen the specter of another government shutdown," the letter says. "Second it will reopen the probability of governance by continuing resolution, based on prior year outdated spending needs and priorities, dismissing in one fell swoop all the work done by Congress to enact appropriations bills ...that reflect the will of

Congress and the people we represent.

Third, the current sequester and the upcoming 'Second Sequester' in January would result in more indiscriminate across the board reductions that could have negative consequences on critically important federal programs, especially our national defense."

Indeed, the military stands to be most hurt by the second round of spending cuts, and the Defense Department's budget would fall to \$475 billion, \$21 billion below the current stopgap bill which is funding the government into January.

Measured against what the House approved for DoD in July, it is an even bigger reduction of more than \$50 billion in 2014. And Robert Hale, the Pentagon's comptroller, recently told POLITICO that the second round of sequestration will be more difficult since "we are starting from a degraded position, particularly with regard to readiness as we begin fiscal 2014."

Institutionally, the stakes are huge for the Appropriations leadership, and this helps explain Monday's rare letter. Without a budget deal, the risks are very real that the government will be subject to another 12-month continuing resolution or CR, the third in four years and an immense defeat for the committees

President Barack Obama shares in this loss. At the moment the White House is struggling with its failure to better manage the rollout of health care reform. But if it misses the chance to strike a deal and restore some order to the budget process, it faces lasting damage to the president's second-term agenda.

Thus far, most of the budget discussions have been directly between House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) and his Senate counterpart, Budget Chairwoman Patty Murray (D-Wash.). Ryan has been pushing for Democrats to accept some measure of added means-testing for Medicare beneficiaries -- something Obama has supported. But Ryan has been reluctant in turn to give any ground on closing tax loopholes -- a priority for Murray.

This is a frustration for some in the GOP as well since Ways and Means Committee Republicans like Ryan want to hold onto such tax breaks in the name of future reforms before their tax-writing panel. The catch is that those promised reforms keep getting put off by the leadership and the potential for a deficit reduction bargain is lost in the process.

One option, which has support in the business community, is for tax writers to at least move ahead on corporate tax reform -- where Ways and Means Committee Chairman Dave Camp (R-Mich.) and Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.) laid some groundwork. This could dovetail with a larger budget deal, but it also could die on the vine without more effort by the White House to seize the opportunity.

Senate votes to start work on Defense bill

Ramsey Cox, The Hill

November 18, 2013

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The Senate voted 91-0 Monday to advance the Defense authorization bill.

The procedural vote ended Senate debate on whether to proceed to the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which authorizes more than \$600 billion in defense spending. The Senate then passed the motion to proceed by voice vote.

Senate Armed Services Committee ranking member James Inhofe (R-Okla.) said the NDAA is the "most important piece of legislation that Congress takes up every year." He said he would offer an amendment that allows the Pentagon to prioritize and spread out the mandatory budget cuts known as sequestration.

"This is an irresponsible and dangerous course," Inhofe said ahead of the vote. He said it was unfair that the military has had to bear the brunt of sequester cuts, risking military preparedness. Time is running out to complete work on the "must-pass" legislation. Congress has passed an NDAA bill for 51 straight years.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) had said he wanted to complete work on the Defense bill before Thanksgiving, even if that meant weekend sessions, but Sen. David Vitter's (R-La.) insistence on getting an amendment vote delayed Senate work.

Vitter's Show Your Exemption Act would force members of Congress to disclose which of their staff they have exempted from enrolling in the ObamaCare health exchange. Democrats are likely to complain that Vitter's measure is not germane to NDAA.

Floor debate on the Defense authorization bill is typically a lengthy process, with hundreds of amendments offered and dozens receiving votes. If final passage gets pushed back until after the Senate's Thanksgiving break, it gives a House and Senate conference committee little time to work out differences by the end of the year.

Senators are also expected to offer amendments to NDAA on issues including restrictions on transferring Guantánamo detainees, military sexual assault, Iran sanctions, the National Security Agency's surveillance programs and Syria.

Reid tried to call up the first two amendments but Inhofe objected, saying he wanted an open amendment process.

The first two amendments Reid tried to file were from Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) regarding sexual assault in the military and Sen. Kelly Ayotte (R-N.H.) on Guantánamo Bay.

"What would be a real shame would be to have to file cloture on the bill as it is written," Reid said. "I would hope that if we have to do that we could get cloture on it and get on with the conference."

Problems Seen Impeding Cleanup of Ex-U.S. Nuclear Weapons Site [Hanford]

Global Security Newswire

November 19, 2013

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A long-running program to dispose of radioactive waste created at the onetime biggest nuclear weapons site in the United States is well over budget and behind schedule, the Center for Public Integrity reported on Monday.

Meanwhile, technical experts involved with the project say they have been punished for raising safety concerns, according to the investigative organization.

During the Cold War, reactors at the Hanford Site in Washington produced large quantities of plutonium that went on to fuel thousands of nuclear warheads. For more than 20 years, the federal government has been working to dispose of the 56 million gallons of chemical and radioactive waste left behind. A vitrification facility intended to transform the toxic waste into glass is only about 66 percent finished, even though construction work began in 2001.

Vitrification work was originally expected to begin in 2011, but that start date was delayed until 2019 with an end date now expected for 2047. Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz in October said his department probably will not make the deadline for commissioning the plant. Concerns exist, though, that the Hanford waste will seep out of current underground holding tanks and enter the groundwater supply and ultimately the Columbia River.

At the same time, the projected expense of the facility has soared from \$4.3 billion in 2000 to \$13.4 billion in 2012, according to the Government Accountability Office.

A September audit by the Energy Department's internal watchdog found the government's main contractor on the project, Bechtel, had on numerous occasions altered the blueprints for plant machinery absent a safety assessment on the impacts of the changes.

Walter Tamosaitis, the project's onetime research and technical manager for URS, the main subcontractor to Bechtel, in 2010 was removed from the effort after he provided his bosses with a list of technical issues potentially affecting safety at the plant. He has since filed three different lawsuits over the matter and has seen each of those suits dismissed, which he is appealing.

URS and Bechtel both reject the accusations that they punished Tamosaitis for whistleblowing.

The Energy Department's nuclear safety board in 2011 concluded that

what happened to Tamosaitis "sent a strong message to other ... project employees that individuals who question current practices are not considered team players and will be dealt with harshly."

Shutdown Said to Cost U.S. Nuclear Agency More Than \$300 Million

Global Security Newswire
November 18, 2013

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The recent federal government shutdown is said to have cost the U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration at least \$330 million, the Knoxville News Sentinel reported.

The agency is a semi-autonomous arm of the Energy Department that oversees the nation's atomic arsenal.

Speaking at a conference in Tennessee last week, Don Cook, the NNSA deputy administrator, said the figure applied only to the agency's defense programs. He called the shutdown "distasteful" and an example of what happens "when government can't get its act together."

Cook said he ordered the shutdown of the Y-12 and Pantex facilities early so that nuclear materials and weapons components would be secured before funding was cut off.

Debating the Cost of the Nuclear Triad

Air Force Magazine
November 14, 2013

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With New START reductions now law and cost pressures mounting, Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Welsh said a renewed debate on the cost of the nuclear triad may be coming. "Nuclear deterrence strategy is something we should be thinking and talking about all the time," Welsh told reporters Wednesday during a breakfast event in Washington, D.C. Although he continues to be a believer in the flexibility, survivability, and responsiveness of the nuclear triad, Welsh conceded a debate on its future may be inevitable. "The cost of operating our ICBM fleet . . . is not that significant compared to the cost of running other things," he said. However, the cost of modernizing nuclear infrastructure is not small. That likely will lead to a "very honest debate about where we can afford to invest," and how investments relate to the nation's nuclear strategy, he added. "I don't know where we are going on this," he said. "I think that's a fair debate and the Air Force needs to be in the middle of it." (See also Cold War Relic)