

Moniz: DOE does not need Congress to move ahead on private nuclear waste storage

By Andrew Coffman Smith

(Thursday, September 15, 2016) - The U.S. Department of Energy sees an opportunity in privately owned interim storage facilities to overcome the political impasse over nuclear waste, Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz told a Senate appropriations subcommittee.

Moniz told the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development on Sept. 14 that the DOE is encouraged by the "novel approach" of private initiatives to build interim storage facilities for nuclear waste. In reference to a recent license application [filed](#) at the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission by Valhi Inc. subsidiary Waste Control Specialists and others to build an interim storage facility for 40,000 metric tons of nuclear waste in West Texas, Moniz said the filing suggests a "certain level of consent" in line with the Obama administration's consent-based policy. The DOE [proposal](#) requires the support of communities, states, and the federal government to store or dispose of nuclear spent fuel.

The energy secretary also acknowledged that somewhat unclear language in a statute already authorizes the DOE the ability to store nuclear waste at a private storage facility. For a government-operated facility, he said the DOE would need authorization by Congress. However, Moniz said, "acknowledging that authority from the Congress is very important" for the confidence of potential developers.

When pressed on whether the DOE can go ahead with plans of storing nuclear waste at privately owned facilities, Moniz said the department is already gathering information and will issue a request for information in coming weeks to seek public input. "There's a lot that we can do to move forward," he said; in particular on the issues of spent fuel [transportation](#) and contracting.

The secretary is also hopeful that a consent-based siting plan will be issued later in 2016. Moniz's comments received a positive reception from subcommittee Chairman Lamar Alexander, R.-Tenn., and the panel's ranking Democrat, Sen. Dianne Feinstein of California, who together introduced in 2015 legislation to establish a pilot storage facility for spent fuel from decommissioned nuclear power plants.

Despite the bipartisan efforts on interim storage, Alexander and Feinstein continue to disagree over the only commercial used nuclear fuel and high-level waste repository authorized by the Nuclear Waste Policy Act, at Yucca Mountain in Nevada. The permanent deep geological repository at Yucca Mountain was defunded in 2011 and continues to have its funding blocked by Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, D.-Nev., who is retiring in January 2017.

Feinstein said she cannot continue supporting nuclear energy if there is no strategy for interim storage and long-term disposal of its waste. "Spent nuclear fuels continue to pile up: 77,000 metric tons to date scattered all across our country in spent fuel pools and dry casks at reactor sites," she said. "For me it is a deterrent to new nuclear power. If we can't properly store the waste, we shouldn't build the reactors."

"The lesson in Yucca is that any solution to the nuclear waste issue needs to be voluntary and must have the consent of not only the local governments but also of the state," said Feinstein.

During what were otherwise pro-nuclear remarks, which warned of the environmental and economic consequences if operating licenses of nuclear plants are not extended from 60 years to 80 years, Alexander took a swipe at the [nuclear energy industry](#) on the issue of storage. The Tennessee Republican said it was "a boneheaded move by the nuclear industry" to "jerk the rug out from under" the subcommittee by only endorsing Yucca Mountain instead of supporting several paths at once aimed at solving nuclear waste, including short-term repositories and private storage.

"We should push ahead with something [to store nuclear waste for the near- and long-term]," Alexander said. "Those people who believe that if we stopped one, we should've stopped all, are as misinformed, I think, as those who believe that climate change is urgent but we don't need nuclear power to help solve the problem."