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# Berkley bill would divert Yucca funds

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WASHINGTON -- Rep. Shelley Berkley, D-Nev., plans to introduce a bill next week that would divert all spending on the proposed Yucca Mountain project to alternative waste-management technologies.

The bill would immediately funnel this year's proposed \$445 million Department of Energy budget for Yucca projects to other studies, which would likely include transmutation and reprocessing.

All future spending would be "redirected," too, according to the bill. The total cost of Yucca in the coming years could total \$58 billion, officials estimate.

The legislation would be a radical departure from Congress' current course. It was not immediately clear today if Berkley's bill would have any support among lawmakers. Congress designated Yucca Mountain as the nation's nuclear dump in 1987 and the Department of Energy has invested 14 years and about \$7 billion studying it, most of that money from a waste fund fed by ratepayers who used nuclear-generated electricity.

~~Strident~~ Yucca plan supporters say that while transmutation and reprocessing could be supplemental options to Yucca, new technologies will not replace the need for a permanent repository.

Still, it's realistic to consider that the bill could get some support, Berkley spokesman Michael O'Donovan said. Researchers are just now beginning to understand the implications of new waste management technologies, which could one day be a full-blown alternative to Yucca, O'Donovan said.

"They deserve adequate research and funding to fully understand how these technologies can help us solve the problem in a real and long-term way," O'Donovan said.

The bill would allow the Department of Energy to determine where the money would be spent. But options include transmutation, a process that speeds up the break-down of waste, as well as waste reprocessing, or "recycling" waste.

President Bush in his National Energy Policy recommended further investigating those technologies as supplements -- not alternatives -- to constructing Yucca Mountain.

Yucca Mountain is the proposed site of the nation's permanent burial ground for high-level nuclear waste, eventually 77,000 tons of it. The waste is now stored on-site at the nation's 103 commercial nuclear reactors, and at U.S. defense sites. Yucca, 90 miles northwest of Las Vegas, would be the

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Exhibit #: 1-6

010030

first permanent waste repository of its kind.

Nevada's four-member congressional delegation, strongly opposed to burying waste in the state, has played a part in delaying the project.

"Fighting off a bad idea is not enough," Berkley said in a written statement today. "And the stalemate that we've been able to pull off so far is not a solution.

"If we're going to come up with long-term solutions that make sense for the future of our country, then we're going to have to show a willingness to work together and come up with some alternatives."

Nuclear energy industry officials are luke-warm about reprocessing used nuclear fuel. Several countries, including France, which relies heavily on nuclear power, reprocess spent fuel. But the United States has avoided it because the process separates out plutonium, which officials worry could fall into the wrong hands.

Officials with the industry's top lobby group, the Nuclear Energy Institute, have said reprocessing is not economical. They adamantly back the Yucca plan.

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**Return to the referring page.**

[Las Vegas SUN main page](#)

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