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## Science, politics and Yucca Mountain

### THE NEWS TRIBUNE

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If you use electricity – and everybody does – you’ve been taxed for more than 20 years to finance a nuclear waste project the Obama administration is killing after an investment of \$13.5 billion.

That money is being kissed off for no good reason beyond politics. There’s more: The administration intends to keep paying for the Yucca Mountain project after its death.

Since 1983, geologists and other scientists have been studying Yucca Mountain, Nev., as a permanent storage site for the nation’s radioactive reactor wastes. In 1987, Congress chose Yucca Mountain as the most promising option after scientists had explored every plausible and half-plausible alternative – including burial at Hanford in Eastern Washington.

Electric ratepayers throughout the country have since been financing the necessary research at Yucca Mountain. That research hasn’t turned up any evidence that Yucca Mountain isn’t the best place to bury America’s reactor wastes. It is arid, stable, isolated and under federal control. The proposed site at Hanford, in contrast, was next to the Columbia River and saturated with groundwater.

Pandering to Nevada voters last year, Barack Obama promised to stop the Yucca Mountain project, which has also been a long-time goal of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada.

Obama appointed a Yucca Mountain opponent, Steven Chu, as secretary of energy; Chu has announced that the project is no longer under consideration. A Reid ally, Gregory Jaczko, has been positioned to become chairman of the Nuclear Regulatory commission, which would have to approve any disposal plan.

To top it all, Chu and Reid have announced plans for a commission to recommend waste sites – anywhere in the nation but Yucca Mountain.

Meanwhile, the electricity tax is still being collected, and Obama is still funding the licensing process at Yucca Mountain – \$196.8 million in the budget for next year.

This is all 24-carat politics. On one side, Obama is appeasing a swing state and the constituents of his chief Senate ally. On the other side, he’s leaving in place the law that mandates the Nevada project – because Congress doesn’t want other states put in play again as potential waste sites. So the project has been declared dead while the spending goes on.

Political considerations are expected in Washington, D.C. The difference here is that finding an optimal waste disposal site should be a matter of science. And science is exactly what Obama promised to disentangle from politics just last March.

Perhaps it’s not a question of whether politics should corrupt science so much as whose politics get to do the corrupting.

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