

*Looking Ahead*

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## Get Moving on Yucca

There are just over one hundred nuclear reactors operating in the United States; they provide a fifth of the country's electricity. Given the projected rising demand for electricity, the nation will need dozens of new reactors in the decades ahead if the nuclear ratio is to stay stable—but it has been thirty years since construction has started on any new ones.

That is changing. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has received applications for more than twenty-five new reactors in just the last three years. Construction on some could begin as soon as 2012.

Nuclear energy does not depend on wind, sun, or rainfall; it does not emit air pollutants; and it does not require us to pay kleptocrats who have interests inimical to our own. Of course, it has downsides. Proliferation remains a serious problem, and reactors could become terrorist targets. And there is still no solution to the environmental and security problems caused by radioactive waste. No permanent facilities exist in the U.S. or abroad for securely storing the waste products nuclear plants produce—spent fuel rods; byproducts of fission; contaminated clothing, water, and soil. Today, waste is stored in temporary facilities, typically at the plants where it is generated. Permanent facilities would keep it secure and ensure that it does not leak into the environment.

The most studied and debated site proposed for a nuclear waste facility is Yucca Mountain, Nevada. Decades of research have concluded that an underground repository at the site could meet stringent safety requirements. But during the 2008 presidential campaign, candidate Barack Obama pledged to shut down the Yucca site—hoping to curry favor with voters in a state that had twice voted for George W. Bush—and since becoming president he has sought to eliminate funding for the project. His administration has offered no public explanation, only a promise to “devise a new strategy” for waste disposal. Energy Secretary Steven Chu has called for a blue-ribbon panel to study the matter, and has suggested that technological advances might reduce the amount of waste generated in the future or allow us to extract further use from some existing waste.

These are fine avenues for research, but they do not justify the proposal to abort the Yucca project—perhaps the most thoroughly vetted engineering project in history. And the delay is expensive: The federal government is now liable for tens of billions of dollars to utility companies for having failed to fulfill its obligation under the Nuclear Waste Policy Act to provide a permanent repository. Given that cost, and given our nation's energy needs, the time for dithering and dickerings has passed. The Yucca Mountain project should proceed—posthaste.