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Secretary Richardson Submits Viability Assessment to the President and the Congress

Secretary of Energy Bill Richardson today submitted the Viability Assessment of the Yucca Mountain, Nevada site to the President and the Congress. Yucca Mountain is being studied as a potential geologic repository for the disposition of the nation's spent nuclear fuel and high-level radioactive waste.

The purpose of the Viability Assessment is to provide the President, the Congress, and the public with information on the progress of analysis at the Yucca Mountain site. The Viability Assessment also identifies the critical issues that need additional study before a decision can be made by the Secretary of Energy in 2001 on whether to recommend the site to the President for development as a repository. These issues include the key natural processes in Yucca Mountain, such as water movement, and the long-term performance of the repository and waste package designs.

In 1997, Congress directed the DOE to complete a viability assessment of the Yucca Mountain site that would describe the following:

1. the preliminary design concept for the critical elements for the repository and waste package;
2. a total system performance assessment, based upon the design concept and the scientific data and analyses available by 1998, that describes the probable behavior of a repository in the Yucca Mountain geologic setting;
3. a plan and cost estimate for the remaining work required to complete and submit a license application to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission; and
4. an estimate of costs to construct and operate a repository in accordance with the design concept.

"The Viability Assessment reveals that no show stoppers have been identified to date at Yucca Mountain and that scientific and technical work should proceed to support a decision in 2001 whether to recommend the site to the President for development as a geologic

repository," stated Secretary Richardson. "Before the site can be recommended, DOE will need to demonstrate that a repository can be designed and built at Yucca Mountain that would protect the health and safety of the public and the environment for thousands of years. Uncertainties still remain. To address these uncertainties, DOE plans to improve the preliminary design, complete critical tests and analyses and issue draft and final environmental impact statements."

Secretary Richardson directed the Department's top scientist, Under Secretary Ernest Moniz, to carry out a technical review of the Viability Assessment prior to its release. Under Secretary Moniz conducted the review with a team of experts within the Administration. During the review, Secretary Richardson met with Nevada State officials and representatives, environmental and industry groups and the Technical Review Board to hear their views prior to finishing the assessment. Secretary Richardson also toured the Yucca Mountain site on two occasions over the past two months and questioned the scientists working on the project at length about their findings to date.

"I was very impressed with the high quality of the science that went into the development of the assessment," stated Secretary Richardson. "The Viability Assessment is the first time in more than 15 years of scientific study and analysis that DOE has pulled together what it knows about the site, the preliminary design of a repository, how the site and the design would work together and what questions remain to be answered. While there is technical work still to be done and questions to be answered, I believe the work thus far has been done well."

"I must stress the difference between the issuing of this Viability Assessment which I am doing today and a decision I or my successor will make in 2001 on whether to recommend the Yucca Mountain site to the President for development as a repository," explained Secretary Richardson. "Today's document indicates we need to continue to study Yucca Mountain so that the Secretary of Energy can decide in 2001 whether to recommend the site to the President. As I have stated consistently these decisions will be based on science and the merits, and not on politics."

Secretary Richardson indicated that as part of the additional study, he is committed to working with Nevada officials and the Congress to restore funding so that Nevada can conduct its own scientific oversight of the Yucca Mountain site characterization effort.

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