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Article Last Updated: 11/14/2004 02:52:46 AM

## Senate panel may vote on N-weapons research

Politics: A dispute over spending for the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository complicates matters

By Christopher Smith  
The Salt Lake Tribune

WASHINGTON - Nuclear watchdogs are bracing for a Senate committee to possibly decide Wednesday whether to fund studies on new versions of nuclear weapons.

But a stand-alone vote might not come because of the controversy surrounding the Bush administration's request for \$27 million to study modifying existing nuclear missiles so they can burrow into underground bunkers and \$9 million to study low-yield "mini-nukes" for battlefield applications.

Congress has yet to pass nine of the 13 spending bills that were due at the end of September.

During a lame-duck session beginning Tuesday, Republican leaders want to roll those appropriations into one big spending blueprint called an omnibus bill.

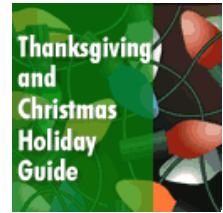
It's harder for rank-and-file lawmakers to vote against an omnibus, because it funds many critical and popular programs while shielding more contentious projects from a direct up-or-down vote.

There is general agreement between the House and Senate on several of the nine overdue spending measures, including Interior, Agriculture, Commerce, Justice and foreign operations. But the Senate's energy and water spending bill, where the nuclear weapons programs are funded, appears hopelessly deadlocked and may not be included in an omnibus.

The dispute centers on spending for the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository, with opposition led by presumptive incoming Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., who is working to kill the project.

Capitol Hill newsletters have reported that congressional leaders probably will avoid an extended brawl over Yucca Mountain during the short session and just pass a continuing resolution. That would keep new spending at last year's level for the weapons studies, nuclear stockpile maintenance and preparing the Nevada dump site.

But an e-mail alert sent recently by the Friends Committee on National Legislation to nuclear activists warned that the Senate Appropriations Committee could take up the weapons research funding in an omnibus bill as early as Wednesday. The



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organization said a leading critic of the "bunker-buster" program, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., intends to offer an amendment to eliminate the funding.

Advertisement "Tell them that new nuclear weapons will not make the world more secure," reads the alert, urging activists to contact members of the committee to support Feinstein's amendment. "Developing new nuclear weapons will send the wrong signal to the rest of the world that nuclear weapons are usable."

Utah Republican Sen. Bob Bennett, a member of the committee, voted for the bunker-buster and advanced weapons concepts studies in the 2004 budget and has indicated he probably will support President Bush's request again if it comes to a vote.

"Without having to do anything more than research, I'm willing to fund the research," he said in an interview last month. "The weapons to do it already exist; all the research is being done to determine how you use them and what their capabilities are for this and I do not see this a precursor to testing."

During Bennett's successful 2004 re-election campaign, anti-proliferation groups ran radio ads in Utah urging voters to contact the senator and urge him not to fund the studies.

If the Senate committee does approve allocating money for new weapons research, the bill would probably go to a House-Senate conference committee to resolve differences with the House version, which stridently opposed funding the programs. Utah's three House members voted in favor of that bill in September.

"The committee's priorities are maintaining our nation's nuclear deterrent in a safe and secure condition and maintaining our nation's integrity in the international effort to halt the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction," reads the House report of the bill, which was approved by a wide margin. "The [Energy] Department's obsession with launching a new round of nuclear weapons development runs counter to those priorities."

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