Science over politics? Hardly

by The San Diego Union-Tribune.

President Barack Obama's announcement Monday that he was moving to restore scientific integrity to government policy-making was an obvious shot at his predecessor. The administration of George W. Bush was routinely accused â€” sometimes fairly, sometimes not â€” of letting politics take precedence over scientific findings.

But as with several other pronouncements of Obama's young presidency, it is sharply at odds with another of his administration's actions. We refer to one of the many underreported stories to be found in the 2009-10 federal budget: the elimination of all funding for preparations to build the first national nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain in Nevada.

So much for scientific integrity. The technology that was to be used at Yucca Mountain has been scrutinized for a quarter-century and found to be perfectly up to the challenge. This is why Congress in 1987 and again in 2002 backed the plan to put the spent fuel rods from the nation's 100-plus nuclear generators - now held at scattered facilities across the country â€” at the remote site. This is why nearly $8 billion has been spent preparing for construction.

Instead, however, Obama has chosen to side with Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., and accept Reid's preposterous, paranoid claim that the repository would turn his home state into "the country's toxic wasteland." What does Reid base this on? Not science. Our best bet is focus group interviews showing that propaganda-stuffed Nevadans hate the project.

Yes, Obama was living up to a campaign promise extracted by Reid. But Obama also promised to "find ways to safely harness nuclear power," a clean energy source that both helps in the climate change fight and reduces U.S. dependence on foreign suppliers. By rejecting Yucca Mountain without offering any alternative, the president has dealt a body blow to hopes the United States could finally take advantage of nuclear power in a manner similar to France, Japan and other nations.

We hope Obama understands that on practical grounds, this decision amounts to repudiating what he said about nuclear energy. His determination to ignore the anti-nuclear hysterics in his party was so strong that he even touted nuclear power in his speech accepting the Democratic nomination. But as things now stand, the hysterics still will get their way â€” thanks to politics subverting science.

Given this sad development, the timing could not be worse for Obama's assertion that his administration will ensure "scientific data is never distorted or concealed to serve a political agenda." If only.

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