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editorial

A nuclear hardball team

Thursday, May 30, 2002 - In nuclear politics, the winners must play hardball. South Carolina has done so for almost a year, stalling plutonium shipments and making the U.S. Department of Energy kowtow to its demands. In doing so it delayed the closure of Rocky Flats, the mothballed nuclear bomb factory near Golden, and, by extension, the cleanup of every other federal nuclear facility nationwide.

Given the national security stakes, it was necessary for Colorado's congressional delegation to toss some political curve balls, too. U.S. Rep. Mark Udall, a Boulder Democrat whose district includes Rocky Flats, and U.S. Sen. Wayne Allard, a Colorado Republican who serves on a committee overseeing DOE, introduced bills to make DOE honor its promises to Colorado - and thus to every other state awaiting cleanup of federal nuclear sites.

Called HR 4744 in the House and S.2523 in the Senate, the bill would accomplish two goals. It would slap DOE with fines of \$1 million a day, up to \$100 million annually, if DOE doesn't remove all plutonium from Rocky Flats by November 2003. Under an Allard idea, it also would let DOE reopen the environmental study about the disposal of surplus plutonium, giving the feds options if DOE can't send plutonium to its facility at Savannah River, S.C.

Notably, the measure seeks the same federal guarantees for Colorado as DOE offered South Carolina, thus ensuring that South Carolina doesn't get preferential treatment compared with all other states that have federal nuclear sites.

Plutonium, a manmade element that forms the core of modern atomic bombs, must be trucked out of Rocky Flats to let DOE finish other aspects of the cleanup and closure project. Its removal is the critical path, the long-term project without which other parts of the job simply can't get done.

If DOE meets Rocky Flats' 2006 closure deadline, though, the feds can use the \$700 million now spent at the Colorado facility annually and apply it toward cleaning up other facilities in the federal nuclear complex. Rocky Flats' closure is a national issue, not just a Colorado matter.

Significantly, Udall, a liberal Democrat, got two conservative Republicans, U.S. Reps. Joel Hefley of Colorado Springs and Tom Tancredo of the metro suburbs, to co-sponsor HR 4744. Coloradans are proud that their congressional members set aside partisan differences to work toward such a crucial goal.

The bipartisanship may spread. If folks in California and Idaho realize that South Carolina's bombast also is delaying cleanups at Lawrence Livermore and Idaho National laboratories, U.S. Sens. Dianne Feinstein, a liberal California Democrat, and Larry Craig, a conservative Idaho Republican, could suddenly find themselves allies on this cause.

Colorado's congressional delegation should make sure that lawmakers from other states understand why closing Rocky Flats by 2006 is important to their states, too.

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