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Broad Opposition To DOE Proposal To Use Weapons Plutonium For Commercial Nuclear Power Reactor Fuel

Washington, D.C. - A growing coalition of national, international and grassroots groups today announced vigorous opposition to a plan by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) that could lead to the use of approximately 50 tons of plutonium from nuclear bombs as fuel in U.S. commercial nuclear reactors. The DOE today released a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) on plutonium disposition that advocates investigating two options - use as fuel or immobilize in glass for direct disposal as waste for permanent storage of military plutonium.

One of the options involves combining plutonium and uranium into mixed-oxide (MOX) fuel pellets for use in nuclear power reactors. The other is to vitrify (encapsulate in glass) plutonium into a waste form. The pursuit of the MOX option would undermine a 20-year United States policy to avoid the civilian use of plutonium. In addition, if a MOX fabrication plant were in operation, there would be renewed pressure for the DOE to increase the reprocessing of irradiated (spent) fuel to isolate plutonium which could then be used as MOX.

"This is a stunning reversal of the prudent foundation of U.S. nonproliferation policy designed to keep nuclear weapons out of the hands of terrorists and rogue states," said Jim Adams, Senior Analyst for the Safe Energy Communication Council. "Opposed by many scientists, experts and the public, developing the MOX option would open a dangerous Pandora's box," he concluded.

The PEIS failed to formally consider the economic and nonproliferation factors weighing against the use of MOX. These issues were discussed in other documents that were not subject to the strict standards required by the National Environmental Policy Act. "It is important that Secretary of Energy Hazel O'Leary weigh the cost and nonproliferation factors that were kept out of the PEIS before arriving at a final decision," noted Paul Leventhal, President of the Nuclear Control Institute. "Plutonium fuel in commercial reactors makes no sense from a cost standpoint and is downright dangerous from a proliferation standpoint. Vitrification makes sense from both perspectives and should be her first choice," concluded Mr. Leventhal.

The pursuit of the MOX option will send the wrong signal to other countries about a change in the U.S. position on nuclear fuel policy. "Using the MOX fuel option for plutonium disposition will take longer, be more expensive, and encourage world-wide use of plutonium, a key component of nuclear weapons," stated Maureen Eldredge, Program Director for the Military Production Network, a coalition of grass-roots organizations. "There is no good rationale for continuing down this dangerous path. If this is an example of how the US shows strong leadership on international security issues, we are in big trouble."

"Greenpeace opposes any recommendation by the DOE to use plutonium as nuclear fuel. The decision to use MOX is a wrong-headed and risky reversal of U.S. non-proliferation policy and is being made to the satisfaction of the plutonium industry in Russia, France, Britain, and Japan," said Tom Cements, a spokesman for Greenpeace International. "We will vigorously work to oppose the use of plutonium fuel and promote its treatment as nuclear waste," he concluded. Bill Magavern, the Director of Public Citizen's Critical Mass Energy

Project, declared that, "Citizens groups across the country have stopped previous attempts to use plutonium as a reactor fuel and we will fight this proposal as long as a better alternative exists - and immobilization is a better alternative."

Furthermore, the U.S. is worried about the intention of Russian leaders who are leaning towards the development of a MOX industry to deal with surplus plutonium from the dismantlement of nuclear weapons. "The most important result of a decision to pursue a MOX option will be to encourage Russia to produce more weapons-usable plutonium from used nuclear reactor fuel. It will help create a surreal cycle by which Russia will make spent fuel out of weapons plutonium only to extract more plutonium out of the reactor spent fuel, thereby perpetuating the threat of theft and diversion," said Dr. Arjun Makhijani, President of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research In Takoma Park, Maryland.

Another major concern for coalition members is the impact of the DOE providing significant subsidies to the nuclear power industry to facilitate the use of MOX in commercial reactors. "This smells like polluter pork to me," said Anna Aurilio, a staff scientist with the U.S. Public Interest Research Group. "It is scary that utility executives would be bribed to keep operating their aging, uneconomic reactors," she added.

"We have major problems in the U.S. with nuclear power wastes, and now DOE is going to spend hundreds of millions of tax-payer dollars to subsidize failing, uneconomic reactors, which will generate wastes more dangerous and complicated than what we have today," declared Mary Olson, a spokesperson for the Nuclear Information and Resource Service. "The concerns of citizens in reactor communities, who will be directly affected by the use of MOX fuel, did not influence the development of this policy, but they will have a lot to say about whether it will be implemented," she concluded.

"Commercial use of plutonium poses significant radiological hazards to facility workers and highly radioactive waste streams which imperil the surrounding environment and for which there are no viable waste management solution. The better approach would be to convert the plutonium into glassified waste for permanent underground disposal," concluded Timothy Takaro, a board member of Physicians for Social Responsibility.



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