Groups Warn of Environmental and Proliferation Dangers of Global Nuclear Energy Partnership Proposals

Community Groups Oppose Federal Effort to Build Reprocessing Plant and Fast Burner Reactor

By October 31, the Department of Energy (DOE) plans to announce the corporations and local governments who will receive up to $5 million to prepare applications to host facilities under the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (GNEP) program.

The member organizations of the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability (ANA) are opposed to DOE’s effort to bring the nation’s spent nuclear fuel to any site and to build a full-scale commercial reprocessing plant and fast burner reactor. “GNEP would be a financial, environmental, and nuclear proliferation disaster,” says Susan Gordon, Director of ANA.

Under GNEP, the DOE would restart plutonium reprocessing in the U.S. after a thirty-year hiatus. Reprocessing – extracting the plutonium and uranium from the spent fuel rods of commercial reactors – was abandoned in the U.S. because it was financially unfeasible, environmentally devastating, and increased the worldwide stockpile of separated plutonium. The continuing financial liabilities and environmental problems persist at Hanford, Washington; Savannah River Site, South Carolina; Idaho National Laboratory, Idaho; and West Valley, New York.

Reprocessed plutonium could be used to produce nuclear weapons. North Korea recently demonstrated this by testing a nuclear weapon it produced from plutonium obtained through reprocessing. The fast reactors are a proliferation risk as well. Depending on how they are operated and fueled, fast reactors can be used to either consume or produce plutonium. The United States cannot credibly persuade other countries to forgo reprocessing and other nuclear technologies while we proceed with these technologies ourselves.

Despite the claims of proponents, reprocessing will not help solve the nation's waste storage problem. It will only increase the waste that must be managed. The legacy of past reprocessing in the U.S. is 100 million gallons of extremely poisonous high-level radioactive waste stored in 243 leak-prone underground tanks that are currently threatening crucial water supplies.

States that may be potential hosts for the GNEP facilities that could receive the funds from DOE include Idaho, Kentucky, New Mexico, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington. Each local government or corporation selected for these site studies will have 90 days to prepare more
detailed plans, illustrating the sites’ capabilities to store large amounts of highly radioactive waste, and to reprocess the fuel and host a fast burner reactor.

The Alliance for Nuclear Accountability consists of 33 organizations that are downwind and downstream from the U.S. nuclear weapons complex. These organizations and the communities they represent know first-hand the effects of environmental degradation from past reprocessing and nuclear weapons production.

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Department of Energy information on Siting Studies is available at:
http://uri.ne.doe.gov/gnepParticipation.html#gnepSitingStudies