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News

Posted on Tue, Jun. 04, 2002

The Charlotte Observer

If reimbursed, S.C. can help store plutonium

MARGUERITE S. WILLIS
Special to The Observer

For the past half century, South Carolinians have shared the responsibility of national defense by hosting a facility dedicated to creating and maintaining the U.S. nuclear weapons stockpile. We've done it willingly, too, because our service produced a benefit to the state in the form of good jobs, additional tax revenues and greater economic opportunity.

Now, the federal government wants us to answer the call again and accept plutonium from Colorado. The argument is that we have a state-of-the-art facility -- and the proven expertise -- to manage this material in the safest, most responsible manner.

We do, but that's not the issue. The issue is whether the government is going to guarantee that we receive a corresponding benefit that is fair and just.

So far, much of the debate has revolved around competing positions that have basically made any resolution almost impossible. That's why a group of citizens has joined Gov. Jim Hodges' suit in an effort to bridge the gap between those positions by proposing a reasonable, workable response that is in the best interests of our state.

What we are seeking is pretty simple:

When the first shipment of plutonium crosses our state line, the federal government will *immediately* start paying South Carolina a service fee. These payments will continue as long as this material remains here, or until the government decides whether and where to build a mixed oxide fuel plant that would convert the plutonium to fuel for power generation. If that facility is located in South Carolina, the payments stop the day the material is transported to that site. If it's not built here or not built at all, we get rid of the plutonium the instant that decision is made.

This is a classic example of turning a lemon into lemonade. The federal government wants us to solve its problem, and that's fine. But the government must pay. The longer the material stays, the more it pays. And the more it pays, the more we benefit.

We're estimating that at minimum, South Carolina will get an annual payment of between \$325 and \$350 million. That's hardly small change, and its impact is magnified considerably by the state's current budget crisis.

Think about it. We'd be performing a critically important national service -- and getting hundreds of millions in payment -- without a tax increase. That means we'll be able to restore programs for the sick and the disadvantaged. We'll be able to protect our senior citizens from skyrocketing health care

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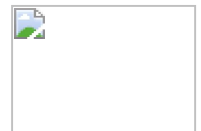
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costs. We'll be able to give our children the educational opportunities they need to get a good job, go to college and provide for their families.

There are larger policy implications as well, both globally and locally.

This solution ensures that the process of dismantling the U.S. nuclear arsenal continues in accordance with our international obligations. The necessary progress of post Cold War disarmament -- a stated objective of this nation -- can proceed without obstruction.

At the same time, we also guarantee that South Carolinians have a voice in this debate. We're the ones who are going to be affected. We're the ones who are going to be dealing with this long after the current crop of leaders has left the scene. We have a right to be heard. Any plan that denies us this right does not serve the larger public interest.

I have no doubt that some will label this compromise a "sell-out" and that the cries of "don't dump on us" -- already so loud they threaten to silence any possible resolution -- will continue. That makes for great rhetoric, but bad policy.

We have the resources to solve the problem better than anyone. We've been helping to solve it for five decades. We've always done our fair share, and served the national interest with honor, vigor and courage.

Now, our country is asking us to do more. All we ask is that our country keep its continuing promise to us, and deliver a level of benefits equal to our service -- benefits that will help our citizens, preserve the value of our land, and protect the honor of our commitment. If the government disregards that request, it can take its plutonium elsewhere. The U.S. Constitution requires nothing less.

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