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Letter to Congress: Groups Call for End of Plan to Use Plutonium as MOX in Nuclear Reactors

Today environmental, energy and nuclear disarmament groups from across the nation called on Congress to stand firm in its commitment to end the US Department of Energy's (DOE) plutonium fuel program, also known as "MOX." In a letter to Representative David Hobson (R-OH) signed by 59 groups led by Nuclear Watch South, Union of Concerned Scientists, Nuclear Control Institute and Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League, financial, political and scientific reasons were given for continuing to oppose the plan to manufacture and burn atomic warhead material in Duke Energy nuclear power plants.

The letter is from a wide range of groups from all parts of the country — from huge national organizations to local grassroots groups based near the Savannah River Site (SRS) and the Duke reactors proposed to use the MOX fuel near Charlotte. The letter thanks Hobson for leading the House in canceling funding for MOX and reinstating significant funding for plutonium immobilization. Reasons for ending the MOX program listed the escalating cost of the US plutonium fuel factory; unsuitability of much of the plutonium waste for use as reactor fuel; and the US agreement with Russia which remains stalled in the face of technical and political hurdles.

Edwin Lyman with Union of Concerned Scientists said, "DOE's MOX program would greatly increase the safety and security risks associated with disposal of bomb-grade plutonium while sticking taxpayers with an exorbitant bill. It is high time to terminate this misguided and dangerous program. Immobilization of plutonium with radioactive waste is a far safer and more secure option and deserves full funding."

Louis Zeller of the Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League said, "People in the Carolinas have opposed this program from the beginning. We call upon Congress to stem the tide of red ink and end this ill-begotten program

Even as the letter was being delivered to Congress, it was learned that DOE plans to reopen the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) on plutonium disposition. It is expected that the EIS will focus on plutonium immobilization which is currently being tested at SRS using the glassification process to treat millions of gallons of highly radioactive liquid wastes generated in decades of plutonium extraction.

Glenn Carroll with Nuclear Watch South (formerly GANE), which legally opposed construction of the MOX factory at SRS said, "We are optimistic that DOE is finally coming around to embrace plutonium immobilization which is a far more straightforward approach to safeguarding plutonium than MOX. The revised EIS must look at immobilization of all surplus plutonium and public hearings must be held in major cities near SRS — in Columbia, Atlanta, Augusta and Savannah."

The plan to dispose of dismantled plutonium warheads was proposed by DOE a decade ago and was to proceed simultaneously in the US and Russia. Technical and legal challenges brought by environmental and energy groups delayed the project, and international funding sought by the US has been lacking.

The letter signed by representatives of 59 groups was hand-delivered on Capitol Hill to key members of the House and Senate subcommittees responsible for financing the MOX program.

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