

Nuclear Control Institute * Natural Resources Defense Council * Greenpeace

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GROUPS PETITION NRC TO DENY LICENSE FOR EXPORT OF WEAPONS PLUTONIUM TO CANADA

Fueling Canadian Civil Reactors with Bomb Material Poses Security and Proliferation Threats, Groups Contend

Washington---Three public-interest organizations today announced they petitioned the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to reject a proposed export of U.S. military plutonium to test its potential for use as reactor fuel in Canada's civilian nuclear electricity program.

In [a petition filed yesterday with the NRC](#), the Nuclear Control Institute, Natural Resources Defense Council and Greenpeace asked the Commission to deny a license to the Los Alamos National Laboratory to export the plutonium to a test reactor at Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd. (AECL)'s Chalk River Laboratories in Canada.

They claimed the export of bomb material as civilian fuel would harm U.S. national security and would prejudice the outcome of an ongoing federal environmental review of options for disposing of surplus plutonium from the U.S. nuclear arsenal. These options include directly disposing of the plutonium as nuclear waste, as well as combining it with uranium for use as a mixed-oxide (MOX) fuel in reactors that produce electricity.

In a related move, the three organizations wrote to Secretary of Energy Hazel O'Leary, asking her to withdraw Los Alamos' license application until DOE's environmental review of plutonium disposal options is completed and she issues her decision. They said the application was "premature and inappropriate" because it appeared to prejudge her decision or at least to leverage it in favor of the MOX option.

In their petition to the NRC, the groups noted that although the pending license application was only for slightly more than two pounds of plutonium contained in MOX fuel pellets, as much as 50 tons of surplus weapons-grade plutonium could be made available by the United States and Russia for use in the Canadian program. "Therefore, despite the limited nature of the actual proposed export pending before the Commission, there can be no question that it represents an important first stepping stone to a program of substantial proportions," the groups said in their petition.

They pointed out that "the proposed export marks not only the first actual use of military plutonium for purposes of fueling a civil reactor (even a test reactor for experimental purposes) but also the first export of such material for these purposes." Yet, they noted, the Executive Branch provided the Commission with only a "cursory, one page statement" supporting issuance of the license that contained "no analysis of the risks and benefits of the proposed export" required by NRC regulations. The groups questioned the adequacy of transport arrangements, as "it is not clear whether MOX shipments would receive the same level of protection as U.S. nuclear weapons transports, i.e., use of safe, secure transport (SST) vehicles along the entire route both in the United States and Canada."

The three organizations warned that issuance of the license could stimulate creation of a commercial industry in the United States to produce plutonium MOX fuel, and encourage expansion of MOX industries in Europe and Japan. Such a development would run counter to the NRC's 1977 decision, at the urging of the Executive Branch, to suspend licensing of MOX use in the United States. "From the non-proliferation interest of limiting to the fullest possible extent commerce in weapons-usable materials, the complete demise of the commercial plutonium industry would be desirable," the groups argued. They noted it was still the policy of the Clinton Administration not to encourage civil use of plutonium and to seek to eliminate where possible the accumulation of stockpiles of plutonium.

The petitioners also warned of a special danger in demonstrating the feasibility of MOX use in CANDU reactors---the type of power reactors developed by Canada for domestic use and for export. CANDUs are operated in India, South Korea, Romania and Argentina, each of which "at some point had an active program to develop nuclear weapons," they noted.

Warning that non-Canadian CANDU operators "are likely to seize on [MOX demonstration in Canada] as a precedent to justify their own use of plutonium," the groups told the NRC "it is imperative that the pending export not be examined simply as an isolated export of a small amount of plutonium for experimental purposes but within the larger framework of U.S. plutonium disposition and nuclear non-proliferation policy and the risks of tilting, especially prematurely, toward MOX disposition options."

They asked the NRC to grant a full oral hearing on the Los Alamos license application to ensure that its significant proliferation implications are thoroughly assessed.

Copies of [the 37-page petition](#) and [the letter to O'Leary](#) are available upon request and will soon be available for download from the World Wide Web.



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