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VIRGINIA POWER QUILTS PLUTONIUM "MOX" FUEL PROGRAM

Decision is a victory for nuclear non-proliferation

Virginia Power, a Richmond-based electric utility, has cancelled plans to irradiate plutonium-uranium mixed oxide ("MOX") fuel in its North Anna 1 & 2 nuclear power plants. A U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) spokesman confirmed Friday that Virginia Power has withdrawn from the Duke-Cogema-Stone&Webster (DCS) business consortium that was awarded a \$130 million contract last year to manufacture and irradiate MOX fuel using plutonium from dismantled nuclear warheads.

"Virginia Power's decision is a victory for nuclear non-proliferation," said Thomas Clements, Executive Director of the Nuclear Control Institute, a Washington, DC-based nuclear non-proliferation research and advocacy center. "We object to the use of weapons plutonium as fuel in civilian reactors because it poses a significant threat to public safety, security and the environment, and runs counter to 25 years of U.S. nuclear non-proliferation policy."

According to Clements, "The proposed use of MOX fuel would have presented Virginia Power with hidden costs and financial risks, and subjected the company to an unpredictable MOX fuel use schedule given that the pace of plutonium disposition in the United States is tied to the disposition schedule in Russia. Duke Power, which is facing an April 20 shareholder vote on its plans to use MOX fuel, should also withdraw from the MOX program." Clements added that NCI and other public-interest groups "would prefer to see weapons plutonium immobilized with glassified, highly radioactive waste for direct disposal."

According to Dr. Edwin Lyman, NCI Scientific Director, "The sudden withdrawal of Virginia Power from the MOX program could jeopardize the US-Russian plutonium disposition agreement now under negotiation. In order to dispose of two tonnes of US military plutonium each year, as the agreement dictates, Duke Power will now have to load more MOX fuel into its nuclear plants than has ever been attempted elsewhere, creating additional safety concerns. The entire MOX-focused strategy of the plutonium disposition program must now be reevaluated."

Plutonium MOX fuel has never been used commercially in the United States and is now generating concerns and controversy. Recent revelations that British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. (BNFL) cut costs by falsifying quality-control data for MOX fuel produced for Japanese and European utility customers has resulted in those customers canceling orders for MOX fuel. Quality-control problems with MOX fuel produced by Virginia Power's former consortium partner, Cogema, have recently been uncovered in Germany.

Even under perfect manufacturing conditions, MOX fuel poses a grave safety threat. Dr. Lyman conducted a MOX fuel safety study which concluded that, in the event of a severe accident resulting in a large radioactive release, an average of 25% more people would die of cancer if the reactor were using a partial core of plutonium-MOX fuel, as opposed to a full core of conventional uranium fuel.



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