

U.S. PUBLIC INTEREST RESEARCH GROUP * PUBLIC CITIZEN * TAXPAYERS FOR COMMON SENSE
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NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL * NUCLEAR CONTROL INSTITUTE
NUCLEAR INFORMATION & RESOURCE SERVICE * PEACE ACTION
PHYSICIANS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY * SIERRA CLUB

Save Taxpayers Millions, Protect the Environment and Reduce Proliferation Risks

March 26, 2003

Dear Member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee:

As national taxpayer, public interest, environmental, arms control and public health organizations, we are writing in opposition to provisions in Rep. Joe Barton's energy bill that would promote nuclear waste reprocessing and initiate a dangerous reversal of U.S. nonproliferation policy. As currently drafted, sections 6411 and 6431 of the bill provide \$399 million over the next four years to fund the Department of Energy's (DOE's) new Advanced Fuel Cycle Initiative. The objective of this research and development program is to deploy commercial nuclear fuel reprocessing technologies by 2015. **We urge you to support Representative Ed Markey's amendment to cancel the Advanced Fuel Cycle Initiative.**

Reprocessing irradiated fuel yields plutonium, which is vulnerable to theft or diversion by terrorists. Since the Ford administration, the U.S. has maintained a strict policy against reprocessing waste from commercial nuclear reactors. At a time when proliferation concerns are already heightened by North Korea's decision to restart reprocessing facilities and develop nuclear weapons, reversing the U.S. ban on reprocessing would set a dangerous precedent, encouraging other countries to create plutonium industries and adding hundreds of tons to global plutonium stockpiles that already pose serious proliferation and security risks. The attached *Wall Street Journal* lead editorial of October 2, 2002, highlights the risks involved. Though primarily focused on the problems associated with plans to process weapons plutonium into nuclear fuel, the authors correctly connect these issues and call for an immediate end to the commercial use of plutonium.

This program also poses serious environmental threats. Far from solving the nuclear waste problem, reprocessing technologies generate new forms of radioactive wastes that are even more difficult to manage than waste that has been left in its original form. In fact, according to the Nuclear Control Institute, conventional reprocessing will generate at least 10 times as much nuclear waste, which will require permanent isolation from the environment. The Advanced Fuel Cycle Initiative would cost hundreds of millions of dollars and would not alleviate the controversy over federal nuclear waste policy. The DOE's 2003 Report on the program states that high-level nuclear waste storage/disposal facilities will still be needed to support any reprocessing scheme.

Moreover, at a time when the government projects prolonged budget deficits, this program is fiscally irresponsible and harmful to American taxpayers. In 1999, the DOE estimated that transmutation— a secondary process that would attempt to reduce the amount of long-lived radioactive waste in need of permanent isolation from the environment, and one of the primary goals of the Advanced Fuel Cycle Initiative—could cost the United States as much as \$280 billion to implement. While the DOE has retracted that estimate, it has failed to provide any new estimate of how much this risky experiment will cost taxpayers.

At West Valley, New York, **the only commercial reprocessing plant in this country failed miserably.** The plant reprocessed only one year worth of irradiated fuel in the 6 years it operated (1966-1972), and was plagued with fuel cladding fires, high worker exposures and environmental contamination. The uranium recovered was contaminated and unable to be used for reactor fuel. In 1996, DOE projected the cost to clean up the mess at up to \$8.3 billion. U.S. and New York taxpayers are spending about \$100 million a year to clean up and prevent further environmental damage from the eroding and deteriorating site.

Reprocessing irradiated nuclear fuel is an economic, national security, environmental and health mistake that should not be repeated in the United States. Again, we strongly urge you to support Rep. Markey's amendment to cancel the Advanced Fuel Cycle Initiative.

Sincerely,

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