

Nuclear Energy Plan Would Use Spent Fuel

Makes sense but the creation of power is better left to commercial generators. The government should simply clear the pathways to the use of resources.

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The Bush administration is preparing a plan to expand civilian nuclear energy at home and abroad while taking spent fuel from foreign countries and reprocessing it, in a break with decades of U.S. policy, according to U.S. and foreign officials briefed on the initiative.

The United States has adamantly opposed reprocessing spent fuel from civilian reactors since the 1970s because it would produce material that could be used in nuclear weapons. But the Bush program, envisioned as a multi-decade effort dubbed the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership, would invest research money to develop technologies intended to avoid any such risk, the officials said.

The program has been the subject of intense debate within the administration, and although a consensus has been reached about the direction, a senior official said it will not be ready for Bush to announce in his State of the Union address Tuesday. Even the discussion has stirred concerns among nuclear specialists and some members of Congress who consider it an expensive venture that relies on unproven concepts and could increase the danger of proliferation.

The notion of accepting other countries' spent fuel at a time when the United States has had trouble disposing of its own nuclear waste could also prove highly controversial.

But a small initial investment of money has been programmed into the administration's federal budget plan to be sent to Capitol Hill in two weeks. Senate Energy Committee Chairman Pete V. Domenici (R-N.M.) said yesterday that he expects the White House to send accompanying legislation in February.

"I expect a draft bill from the administration next month on spent nuclear fuel," he said. "I will introduce that bill on behalf of the president, hold a hearing on it and mark it up in committee this spring. I hope it will include a nuclear fuel recycling component. If it doesn't, well, I have been a career-long proponent of nuclear fuel recycling and I intend to pursue it aggressively."

Advocates use the word "recycling" to describe an advanced form of reprocessing that, instead of separating plutonium that can be used in bombs from spent fuel, would produce a mixed-oxide fuel too radioactive for terrorists to handle. Such fuel, called MOX, could be used in special reactors that exist in France but not in the United States.

Edwin Lyman, a senior scientist with the Union of Concerned Scientists, a nonprofit think tank that studies environmental and security issues, said U.N. nuclear inspectors would not make a distinction between that material or the kind of separated plutonium the world is worried Iran might get.

"We think they are putting a fig leaf on it by calling it proliferation-resistant and saying that it's not really reprocessing, so concerns about proliferation risks won't be valid," he said. "But if we develop something that we call proliferation-resistant and it really isn't,

then other countries are going to claim rights to this technology. If it's really proliferation-resistant, would we let Iran have it?"

The fuel proposal is part of a broader push by the president for domestic and global nuclear energy. With worldwide energy demands on the rise and U.S. reliance on foreign oil increasing, Bush has held out nuclear power as a solution that will not affect global warming. "We ought to have more nuclear power in the United States of America," Bush said in a speech last week in Loudoun County. "It's clean, it's renewable, it's safer than it ever was in the past."

In a modern version of the Atoms for Peace program during President Dwight D. Eisenhower's administration, officials said the administration envisions helping developing countries build small nuclear reactors that would produce about 5 to 10 percent of the energy generated by a typical reactor now on line in the United States. Some in Congress believe a global nuclear energy program is aimed at aiding the U.S. effort to build an alliance with India, which is eager for U.S. civilian nuclear technology.

Two senior U.S. officials traveled last week to several countries, including Japan and Russia, to brief them about the initiative. At one session, according to a source who was present, the administration officials said the United States has finally moved on from the Three Mile Island nuclear incident in 1979 that paralyzed the industry for years.