

Panel limits nuclear reprocessing funds

At least they are discussing reprocessing on the assumption that new plants are about to be built.

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A proposal for the United States to resume reprocessing nuclear fuel ran into trouble Thursday in Congress, undermining President Bush's plans to revamp how the nuclear industry deals with its waste.

The plan is part of an international effort to promote nuclear energy, especially in developing countries, as a source of electricity and to control the waste generated.

A House Appropriations subcommittee cut the Bush administration's spending request of \$250 million by nearly \$100 million.

The president envisions the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership as essential to the future of nuclear energy in the United States.

"We will continue to explain the importance and need for full funding of the president's priorities," Energy Department spokesman Craig Stevens said in an e-mail.

It is unlikely the House will add money, but senators may look at it more favorably. Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., whose Senate Appropriations subcommittee has spending control over energy projects, has strongly supported the initiative.

Rep. David Hobson, chairman of the House Appropriations subcommittee on energy, said he supports finding ways to recycle used reactor fuel. But Hobson, R-Ohio, also said he has "serious policy, technical and financial reservations" about the partnership plan.

Hobson said the administration proposed paying for it by cutting money from essential energy programs.

Critics of the initiative say resuming reprocessing – abandoned in the 1970s for proliferation reasons – can make it easier for terrorists or enemy states to obtain weapons-usable plutonium.

Administration officials view the program as a way to control nuclear waste, especially with developing countries turning increasingly to nuclear energy as an electricity source.

Under the plan, the United States and other countries that have the technology for uranium enrichment would lease reactor fuel to other countries and retrieve the spent fuel for reprocessing.

Nonproliferation activists oppose the reprocessing because it separates out plutonium, raising concerns the material – which can be easily transported without detection – could be diverted to make a bomb.

The program envisions reprocessing using a technique where pure plutonium is not separated, but mixed with highly radioactive isotopes, lessening the proliferation danger.

But this process involves as yet unproven technologies and is likely to take decades to advance to the point of having a commercial facility. The Energy Department has targeted 2025 for having a full-scale reprocessing facility in operation.

Edwin Lyman of the Union of Concerned Scientists, a leading critic of fuel reprocessing, said Hobson's subcommittee "is sending a clear message to the administration that it has failed to demonstrate that (GNEP) is ready for prime time."

But Leonor Tomero of the Center for Arms Control and Proliferation said while the action "reflects Congress' wariness" of the program "it leaves the door open for the Department of Energy to begin preparation for demonstration projects."