Eliminate Funding for DOE’s Plutonium Fuel (MOX) Program,
Support Plutonium Immobilization

Dear Chairmen Byrd and Obey,

As you assume the chairs of your respective Appropriations Committees and address budget issues under the continuing resolution (CR) for Fiscal Year 2007, we are writing to express our strong support for the elimination of the Department of Energy’s (DOE) costly plutonium fuel (also called mixed oxide or MOX) program now being considered for the Savannah River Site (SRS). In addition, we want to affirm support for a significant increase in funding for the program to immobilize the U.S. ex-weapons plutonium stockpile with high-level radioactive waste.

Given the extreme constraints imposed on the FY 2007 budget by the CR, major savings can be made by eliminating the MOX program, which may be the most expensive single project now being managed by DOE. The proposed MOX plant alone is estimated to cost around $4 billion, and given DOE’s poor track record, the costs are sure to rapidly escalate over the coming years. By eliminating the long-troubled MOX program, efforts can now be focused on the immobilization of plutonium at SRS, which according to DOE’s own past estimates would be cheaper than MOX for handling all excess plutonium.
The nation cannot afford to pursue both immobilization and MOX. Since immobilization is suited to dispose of both pure and impure plutonium, while the MOX option is not, the choice of immobilization as the right path forward is clear. Moreover, immobilization also poses fewer environmental and proliferation risks than the MOX option.

As you know, the Republican-controlled House voted last year to eliminate the MOX program, but the Senate failed to act on this matter. We recognize the wisdom of this bi-partisan decision by the House and suggest that you take it into full consideration during your decision-making process. The budget for MOX should be zeroed out for FY 2007 and a shut-down of the MOX program should be funded from unspent prior-year balances. In the final FY 2007 Appropriations language, we urge you to state that DOE should immediately begin to terminate the MOX program, halt efforts to begin construction of the MOX plant at SRS, and choose immobilization as the preferred option for plutonium disposition. This decision should also prevail in your deliberations on the FY 2008 DOE budget which is soon to be presented to Congress.

Pursuit of a U.S. MOX program for the last ten years has failed to have the intended impact of leading to the development of a parallel program in Russia. The G-8 has refused to fully fund the Russian MOX plant, the Russian Duma has failed to ratify the liability agreement. Further, the Russians have affirmed that they have no interest in a parallel program using MOX in their light-water reactors and instead are pushing for construction of a costly new plutonium breeder reactor, the BN-800, which they hope the U.S. will build for them under the auspices of the misguided and stumbling Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (GNEP).

As a coalition of national and regional groups concerned about good government, the environment, the economy and the proliferation of nuclear weapons, we have been deeply troubled by DOE’s blind pursuit of the problem-plagued MOX program despite clear warning signs of its impending failure. We hope that you will now take the opportunity to restore close oversight over this expensive program and take action to guarantee that DOE quickly gets on with immobilization of surplus plutonium at SRS.

We thank you for taking our views into consideration and look forward to your making the sound fiscal decision to eliminate the MOX program once and for all.

Sincerely,

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To respond to this letter or if you have questions about plutonium disposition issues and/or concerns about the program in the SRS region, please contact Glenn Carroll, Nuclear Watch South, P.O. Box 8574, Atlanta, GA 31106, 404-378-4263, atom.girl@mindspring.com

Attachment: additional signatories

cc:
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