

Bill Richardson

August 21, 2015

Dear Leader Reid:

Harry:

As Congress nears its return to take up a host of pending issues, I write today to express my profound concern over determined attempts by some to use the budget process to unravel our progress in meeting key international nuclear non-proliferation commitments.

I speak specifically of the US-Russia Plutonium Management and Disposition Agreement of 2000 (PMDA), signed during my tenure as Secretary of Energy, and the vital role of the Mixed Oxide Fuel Fabrication Facility ("MOX"), now two-thirds complete in South Carolina, in meeting our obligations. Under the PMDA, each side is to permanently render useless 34 metric tons of surplus weapons grade plutonium by "burning" it as fuel to make electricity in civilian reactors.

Almost 2000 highly paid and unionized workers are on the job at MOX, in what is otherwise a right-to-work state. These workers are the vanguard of the PMDA because all of them – whether carpenters or pipefitters, or electricians – had to intensively retrain because of 30 years of zero nuclear construction experience in the United States.

The PMDA is working, despite all the tensions in US-Russia relations, and I am on the record supporting project completion in opposition to certain administration officials, including some in my former department, in their aggressive campaign against MOX, using made-to-order "studies."

This past Spring, for instance, we were treated to a "study" by The Aerospace Corporation, an Air Force contractor with absolutely no nuclear construction experience or expertise. According to Aerospace, another 30 years is needed to finish the already two thirds complete facility, at whimsical cost estimates built on assumptions apparently dictated by DOE itself. These vastly defy all recent cost estimates by GAO and the Army Corps of Engineers.

What's worse, though, is the "alternative disposition pathway" for downblended plutonium assumed by Aerospace and DOE. They magically conjure the appearance of an instant underground disposal facility, and cite the WIPP facility in New Mexico as a "reference case" – whatever *that* means - to claim a much cheaper path forward for plutonium.

In short, they use WIPP as some kind of "reference," while trying to claim that they're not really proposing to use the real physical WIPP as a practical "alternative." Which is it? The truth is that they have fantasies, and nothing real, apart from MOX.

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WIPP remains closed, with no re-opening date, since a series of accidents have caused a suspension of activities there since early 2014. Further, the current mission of WIPP can only be hindered by the years of legislative debate and environmental impact analyses that would go into a required enlarging of WIPP, and the changing of its allowed waste profile.

In fact, as a former Secretary of Energy and Governor of New Mexico, I can assure you that WIPP, in our lifetimes, has the same chance of accepting weapons grade plutonium that Yucca Mountain has for accepting spent reactor fuel. It is self-deluding to claim otherwise.

It is also reckless from a non-proliferation point of view, because – as even the administration concedes – only MOX fulfills our obligation under the PMDA. Regardless of vague pledges to “talk to the Russians” – which is all anyone says in Hill testimony everywhere - any non-MOX “alternative” violates our landmark agreement.

Subsequent to the Aerospace report, DOE devoted significant resources to another study, this one by a “Red Team” assembled to review project cost and schedule. As well-intended as members of this latest group surely are, they were given only six weeks to do their job, and could only review the work of others for a report that was originally due on August 10.

As things stand, a host of dueling studies and claims have confused lawmakers and the public for years. This must stop, and I would respectfully ask that you urge the Department of Energy to cut through the clutter and re-baseline the MOX project in a collaborative effort that yields a final and credible-to-all cost and in-service date. No well-informed oversight by Congress is possible without a re-baselining.

We can all be proud of the leadership that you and others have brought to sustaining a vital plank in our nation's effort to rid the US and Russia of enough deadly plutonium to power some 17,000 warheads. It is time to finish what we start, and I hope you'll join me in showing the Department of Energy and others that abandoning our non-proliferation commitments is a very bad idea.

Sincerely,



Governor Bill Richardson