



Savannah River Site Watch

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For Immediate Release

February 6, 2015

UK-Flagged Ships Set to Transport Plutonium from Japan to US Located in Panama Canal

Ships on Secret Mission to Carry 331 Kilograms of Plutonium to US DOE's Savannah River Site in South Carolina as Part of Nuclear Security Summit Preparation; Plutonium to be Stranded at SRS

[Photos and Screen Shots of Vessel Tracking Linked at Bottom, Right of SRS Watch Photo Page](#)

Columbia, South Carolina – Two armed transport vessels on a secret mission to retrieve weapons-grade plutonium in Japan and transport it to the U.S. Department of Energy's Savannah River Site (SRS) in South Carolina have been located in the Panama Canal. The spotting of the ships confirms their route to Japan and that their mission is plutonium transport, according to the public interest group Savannah River Site Watch, whose personnel have tracked such ships for more than 20 years.

The specialized nuclear transport ships are slated to carry 331 kilograms of plutonium to the U.S. as part of alleged nuclear non-proliferation efforts in connection to the upcoming Nuclear Security Summit. The ships had vanished from the public eye on their departure on January 19 from the United Kingdom.

The Pacific Egret and Pacific Heron, based in Barrow-in-Furness, UK and operated by the private company Pacific Nuclear Transport Limited (PNTL), entered the canal on the afternoon of February 5 and exited into the Pacific Ocean after a 9-hour transit. [Webcams operated by the Panama Canal](#) were cut off as the ships approached the canal entrance, an ineffectual and ridiculous effort to hide their passage from the public and that did nothing to enhance the security of the empty ships.

As 236 kilograms of the plutonium originated in the UK, the US has failed to present any justification for its transport to South Carolina, where DOE is struggling to find a "disposition" path for 13 metric tons of plutonium already at SRS. 93 kilograms are of US-origin and 2 kilograms originated in France. The materials were sent as far back as the 1960s to Japan for testing of "fast" nuclear reactors. At the Nuclear Security Summit in March 2014, the US and Japan pledged to remove plutonium and highly enriched uranium from the facility where the material is stored at the Tokai nuclear site.

"We strongly object to foreign-origin plutonium coming into South Carolina when DOE's program to manage surplus weapons plutonium is in shambles," said Tom Clements, director of Savannah River Site Watch (SRS Watch). "As DOE's plutonium fuel (MOX) project has totally failed, it's time for DOE to live

up to its commitment to remove plutonium from South Carolina and not bring in more with no viable disposition path out of the state.”

After an intense 5-day ship-spotting effort led by [Cumbrians Opposed to a Radioactive Environment \(CORE\)](#), based near the UK’s Sellafield nuclear site, and joined by SRS Watch, the ships were detected upon entering the crowded waters on the approach to the Atlantic side of the Panama Canal. The navigation beacons (Automated Information System - AIS), which had been turned off before the ships departed the UK, were turned on as the vessel neared the entrance of the canal. Both public interest organizations had predicted on the ships’ departure that they were bound for Japan and would travel via the Panama Canal.

The empty vessel are expected to arrive in Japan in about 25 days to pick up the plutonium now stored at the [Fast Critical Assembly \(FCA\)](#) at Tokai. In an environmental document prepared by DOE and released on December 28, 2015, up to 900 kilograms of plutonium in a number of countries is slated to be taken to the Savannah River Site for storage and unknown disposition, an issue which is causing growing concern in South Carolina.

At the Nuclear Security Summit in March 2014, the [US and Japan pledged to remove plutonium and highly enriched uranium from the Fast Critical Assembly](#). The upcoming shipment will not be concluded before the summit in Washington, DC on March 31-April 1.

While some will celebrate this removal of the plutonium from Japan, it will do nothing to address the fact that Japan now has a plutonium stockpile of about 10.5 metric tons, according to SRS Watch. “While officials may declare the plutonium removal a non-proliferation success at the upcoming Nuclear Security Summit, the fact remains that Japan’s plutonium stockpile and efforts to increase that stockpile through operation of a new reprocessing plant pose far greater proliferation risks,” said Clements. “To focus on the real risks of weapon-usable plutonium in Japan, the summit must issue a demand that Japan halt its program to reprocess spent fuel and cease accumulation of more plutonium.”

On the 55-day return voyage to the naval port in Charleston, South Carolina, DOE has said that the ships carrying their plutonium cargo would not utilize the Panama Canal given the security risks associated when passing near land.

To document the passage of the ships through the Panama Canal, numerous screen shots and screen photos were made of a site that tracks vessels – www.marientraffic.com. Many of those images are posted at the bottom of the [photo section on the SRS Watch website](#).

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Notes:

1. SRS Watch news release - January 19, 2016 - [news release linked here](#)

Transport Ships Involved in Controversial Plutonium Shipment from Japan to US DOE's Savannah River Site (SRS) Depart Port in Great Britain, Transport Completion Doubtful before Nuclear Security Summit in March

Bulk of 331 Kilograms of Plutonium is of UK Origin and Must Not be Dumped at SRS - via Port of Charleston, South Carolina; No Viable Plan for its Disposition or Removal from South Carolina

Linked in News Release and at [SRS Watch Photos: Recent Photos of Transport Ships in Port of Barrow, UK, Including Loading Ammunition and Deck-Mounted Guns](#)

http://www.srswatch.org/uploads/2/7/5/8/27584045/srsw_news_plutonium_ship_departure_from_uk_january_19_2016.pdf

2. SRS Watch [news](#) release, December 29, 2015

BREAKING NEWS: US DOE rammed through a decision to bring the 900 kg of "gap" plutonium to SRS, including 236 kg of UK-origin plutonium at the FCA in Japan. No public input solicited.

http://www.srswatch.org/uploads/2/7/5/8/27584045/srs_watch_release_draft_ea_gap_plutonium_dec_29_2015.pdf

(see links to many documents and resources in "notes" of this news release)

3. Savannah River Site Watch news release, December 21, 2015

http://www.srswatch.org/uploads/2/7/5/8/27584045/srs_watch_news_japan_plutonium_december_21_2015.pdf

U.S. Department of Energy Quietly Gearing Up to Bring 331 Kilograms of Plutonium in Japan to Savannah River Site (SRS) in South Carolina with No Exit Path Out of the State

Import being Pursued in Advance of Nuclear Security Summit in March 2016 Includes 236 Kg of UK-Origin Plutonium that Should Not Go to SRS Given Struggles with Plutonium Fuel (MOX) Program

(see links to many documents and resources in "notes" of the news release linked above)

4. In December 21 [report](#) SRS Watch Calls on State of South Carolina to Oppose UK Plutonium to SRS:

[DOE'S SOUTH CAROLINA PLUTONIUM DILEMMA: PLUTONIUM KEEPS SECRETLY COMING IN BUT NO VIABLE PLAN TO TAKE IT OUT](#)

5. DOE's Final Environmental Assessment (final EA) of bring up to 900 kg of "gap" plutonium to SRS -

this was prepared in secret and without a solicitation for public comment but SRS Watch obtained a copy of the secret draft EA and forced DOE to release the final EA

December 28, 2015

[EA-2024: Final Environmental Assessment](#)

Gap Material Plutonium - Transport, Receipt, and Processing

<http://energy.gov/sites/prod/files/2015/12/f27/EA-2024-FEA-2015.pdf>

6. DOE's "Finding of No Significant" (FONSI) on the above EA

December 28, 2015

[EA-2024: Finding of No Significant Impact](#)

Gap Material Plutonium - Transport, Receipt, and Processing

<http://energy.gov/sites/prod/files/2015/12/f27/EA-2024-FONSI-2015.pdf>

7. Information Circular 549 - Japan's most recent voluntary reporting to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of its plutonium stockpile, August 28, 2015

<https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/infcirc549a1-18.pdf>

10.5 metric tons (MT) of plutonium, in various forms, still in Japan, posing proliferation risk
37 MT plutonium abroad – in France and UK

8. DOE's "[Plutonium – The First Fifty Years](#)," February 1996, details transfers of plutonium to Japan and other countries. The document states that between 1962-1991 that 114 kg were shipped to Japan, with 104 kg shipped in 1969-70, mostly to the Fast Critical Assembly at Tokai.

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