



JIMMY CARTER

Monday, June 14, 2004

STATEMENT FROM FORMER U.S. PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER ON EFFORT TO RECLASSIFY NUCLEAR WASTE

As governor of Georgia I fought unsafe burial of nuclear waste from the Savannah River Site (SRS) near Aiken, South Carolina. SRS reprocessed spent nuclear fuel to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons during the Cold War, leaving behind by-products of liquid and slurry high-level nuclear waste. Today, 37 million gallons of high-level radioactive waste containing millions of curies of lethal radioactivity remain in 51 aging tanks at SRS, still awaiting a permanent solution. The tanks are located in the water table, near the Savannah River, and amid the Tuscaloosa Aquifer, which Georgia and other states depend on for drinking water.

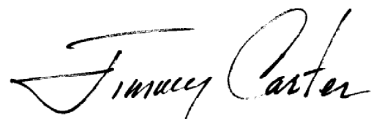
The United States built consensus on how to handle these wastes over three decades. As president I instituted a ban on commercial reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel in the United States, in part to avoid aggravating the waste problem. Responsible disposal of high-level nuclear waste was a consistent goal of my predecessors and successors in the White House, including President Reagan, who signed the Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982. The NWPA requires high-level radioactive waste be disposed of in a permanent, deep geologic repository developed by the Department of Energy, regulated by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Environmental Protection Agency. While thorny questions remain about exactly how to remove, process, and store these wastes, the NWPA does codify a broad consensus, recently reiterated by federal court ruling, that they are too dangerous to remain indefinitely in temporary on-site storage where they are produced.

But now this consensus has been tossed aside. To save clean-up money, the Department of Energy now advocates countermanding the law by simply renaming the waste. The DOE would "reclassify" high-level waste as "incidental waste" and treat it as such. This includes leaving it in place -- in corroding underground steel tanks designed for temporary storage, under a layer of grout. Once grouted, it is virtually impossible to remove and ship the waste for permanent disposal; it stays where it is, seeping into ground and surface water.

A DOE-crafted amendment to this effect was recently inserted by South Carolina's Senator Graham into the complex 2005 Defense Authorization Bill. This was done in committee, with no public hearing whatsoever. It grants the energy secretary unlimited authority to reclassify South Carolina's high-level radioactive waste as incidental waste exempt from the NWPAs. The Graham amendment would abandon at South Carolina's Savannah River Site the same high-level waste I fought to contain as governor of Georgia, which by itself accounts for 70 percent of the radioactivity of all high-level U.S. defense waste. The measure also sets a disturbing precedent for high-level waste cleanup nationwide. DOE is developing a practice of withholding federal cleanup funds from states unless and until they accept its reclassification authority and agree to the incidental waste scheme.

The Graham language attracted opposition from both parties and caused a split floor vote of 48-48 on an amendment to strike it. The split shows Congress's justified apprehension over jettisoning decades of consensus on high-level nuclear waste disposal, especially within a bill whose purpose is meeting the needs of our military, not rewriting established nuclear waste policy.

If Congress must consider unraveling established law and policy on high-level nuclear waste, let it not be via a divisive rider to an election-year wartime defense funding bill with no public hearings. Whether by amendment or in House-Senate conference, the Graham amendment should be cut from the Defense Authorization Bill. Nuclear waste policy touches the legacy of modern presidents of both parties, including President Reagan. It is too important to be altered with less than due deliberation and public debate.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Jimmy Carter". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned at the bottom right of the page.