

Debate breaks out over nuclear waste shipments

By Tris DeRoma

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The U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations debated Thursday whether to use a site in southeast New Mexico to temporarily store the nation's nuclear waste.



Courtesy
Sen. Tom Udall (D-NM)

Heated words were exchanged as Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) tried to block funding for a nuclear waste interim storage program touted by Committee Chairman Sen. Richard Shelby (R-AL) and Sen. Diane Feinstein (D-CA).

Graham, upset over U.S. Energy Department Secretary Rick Perry's order to shutter the MOX facility at South Carolina's Savannah River Site, said the committee and the rest of Congress needed to support the facility and its original purpose, which was to recycle nuclear reactor waste.

Graham and Sen. Tom Udall (D-NM) voiced their opposition to the DOE's plan to reuse the MOX facility for plutonium pit manufacturing.

Plutonium pits are used as triggers for certain weapons.

"Nobody envisioned this thing being used for pit production," Graham said. "That's problematic at best, more designed to please me than anything else. We were promised pit production in 1996, but in 2004 they cancelled it. I'm a bit skeptical with the Department of Energy when it comes to the Savannah River Site, and you should be skeptical about these programs that get started and go nowhere. And we're going to add a new one to the list, because when they try the dilute and dispose method, it's going to fail."

Udall spoke in support of Graham, saying that the DOE decision was partly political, and could end up endangering the nation's security.

"The DOE is trying to make them happy by shifting some plutonium pit production from Los Alamos New Mexico to South Carolina, which is going to lead to higher costs and uncertainty there, putting national security goals at risk," Udall said.

Udall also said that the DOE's proposed plan to ship and dispose of 35 tons of plutonium from the Savannah River Site to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in Carlsbad is not a good idea also.

"WIPP was not envisioned to take high-level waste or weapons-grade plutonium. So far the DOE has done nothing to secure New Mexico's support, besides asking for a new permit that will be decided by the next governor," Udall said.

"Yet, they have offered no funding for independent science to assure New Mexicans that this is safe. They have offered no economic assistance like we have received for accepting WIPP, and their outreach to the Congressional delegation has been an announcement to shift another mission, plutonium pit production, away from Los Alamos to South Carolina. So far it's a bad deal for New Mexico."

Feinstein said, however, that since the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste permanent storage facility in Nevada is politically dead, they should support funding for temporary waste storage instead.

"...I want to say to all of my colleagues, we need your support as well, we have a bipartisan pathway forward in the Senate, but the House won't budge. They won't support any nuclear waste proposal that isn't Yucca Mountain, and we all know that each party has a senator from Nevada who won't let Yucca happen," Feinstein said. "We can't let another year go by with no movement on nuclear waste. We need the members of this committee and the Senate as a whole to be united, and we need your help to push the House to stop holding our bipartisan pilot program hostage to their impossible demands on Yucca Mountain."

Shelby told Graham and the committee that the MOX shutdown the plans to store plutonium at WIPP and creating an interim nuclear waste storage facilities were about keeping costs down, and nothing more. He also said plutonium shipments from South Carolina were already happening.

"Data from the Army Corps of Engineers, the Obama energy department, the Trump energy department... all said that there would be a \$29 billion difference over the next 25 years between continuing... the MOX project that Sen. Graham describes," Shelby said. "It would cost, according to the secretary of energy in his letter of May 10, about \$49 billion when you can do the very same thing with an alternative proposal that works, that's already being used to move plutonium out of South Carolina. You can do it for about \$39 billion less or \$19 billion. So, what I'd like you to have in mind is where are you going to get \$29 billion over the next 25 years... out of the defense budget to pay for something that costs \$29 billion more than what we ought to be spending."

Feinstein said that in addition it would cost \$800 million to \$1 billion a year to run and operate MOX.

Graham replied that the lifecycle to store just the plutonium that he said had a half-life of 24,100 years is what the real cost people in favor of an interim nuclear waste storage program should be looking at. He also said that the cost to finish the building would be about

\$5.3 billion.

"If you believe it would cost \$17 billion more to complete it, then I want to sell you something while you're in my state. That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," Graham said.

Graham also brought up the Yucca Mountain issue, and how that's putting pressure on New Mexico.

"It's become the only thing we can use. Yucca Mountain is not working, so, every time New Mexico gets a letter from the U.S. Government, 'hey, how about this, would you store this...' they're getting a little tired of this. You're asking them to do things that Yucca Mountain was going to do and the people of New Mexico aren't going to take 34 metric tons of plutonium without a fight. It (WIPP) was never designed to do this," Graham said.

Nuclear watchdog organizations in New Mexico questioned Udall's position on the issue.

"What Sen. Udall wants is a study that hands the entire (plutonium pit manufacturing) mission to Los Alamos," Los Alamos Study Group Executive Director Greg Mello said. "There's a feeling in Washington that Los Alamos is better kept as a research and development facility with only a limited amount of manufacturing for a lot of reasons."

As for the plutonium pit question, Mello thinks Udall should examine the Los Alamos' role in plutonium pit manufacturing.

"If Sen. Udall wants Los Alamos to have the entire pit mission, then Sen. Udall needs to question the magnitude of the mission and make it small enough to fit at Los Alamos, because the present pit mission is too big for that site," Mello said.

One elected official in southeast New Mexico was in favor of the nuclear waste storage, when asked about the plan Friday.

State Sen. Gay Kernan, whose district includes Chavez, Eddy and Lea counties, said people that don't live in their part of the state shouldn't be telling them what they can and can't do. She said people that live in the southeast region know the economic benefits the nuclear waste industry provides.

The region has also worked on bringing an interim nuclear waste facility, known as Holtec Interim Waste Storage Project to Lea County, a project that has courted controversy and concern from the public. If approved by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the surrounding communities, the facility would take the spent fuel of nuclear reactors from all over the nation and store them initially for 40 years.

Kernan noted that most of the people who are against the project and nuclear waste storage in New Mexico don't understand.

"Let southeast New Mexico decide if we want to be a supportive community or not. We may not be, but I think there are many in our area that understand the science and are willing to let the NRC to do their work. Following the (NRC) environmental impact study we will make a decision as a community."