

Testimony of Senator Jim DeMint (SC)

Environment and Public Works Committee

31 October 2007

Chairman Boxer, Senator Inhofe, fellow senators. Thank you for the opportunity to be here today and participate in one of the most important discussions we can have about the future of our nation.

We are facing many issues regarding our environment, our nation's energy infrastructure, and the demands of our society. How these interests are balanced will be crucial to our quality of life, security, and competitiveness in a global marketplace.

Unfortunately, I believe many of the issues we are confronting didn't need to happen. Thirty years ago due in part to fear, in part to a lack of information, politicians enacted policies that placed numerous road blocks in front of the nuclear energy industry. As a result, we haven't seen a new construction license issued since the late 1970's and energy companies switched from pursuing clean non-polluting nuclear energy and were forced to rely more and more on coal. Now, politicians condemn the energy industry for pursuing a path they were forced to follow.

Yet, at the same time Europe embraced nuclear energy even more. Today, Europeans have almost twice as many nuclear reactors than the United States. And they slashed dependence on coal by more than 30 percent – while we increased our use of coal by more than 60 percent.

While the United States abandoned already built facilities to recycle nuclear waste, the Europeans took American technology, improved it, and have proven the ability to control the entire nuclear fuel cycle. Now, European countries are proposing even more nuclear reactors in order to meet their pollution reduction commitments under their Kyoto agreements.

Before bad policy decisions shut down much of the nuclear industry in the United States, my state of South Carolina embraced nuclear energy, and today more than half of the energy produced in my state comes from nuclear. South Carolinians are responsible stewards of our environment and have sought to protect the mountains, marshes, and beaches that are our treasures and the life blood of my state's economy.

However, in addition to the civilian nuclear industry, for more than 50 years South Carolina has performed a vital national security mission for our country. Along with states like California, Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, and Washington, the Savannah River Site in Aiken, South Carolina helped produce and maintain the nuclear weapons stockpile that helped us win the Cold War. Some of these sites have closed and others will eventually close. Interestingly enough, some members of this committee – who oppose Yucca Mountain – have written letters to the Department of Energy demanding that nuclear waste be removed from their state and sent somewhere else.

Unlike other facilities, the Savannah River Site has expanded to meet our nation's energy and defense needs. South Carolinians are proud to continue to serve the nation, and recently the

Department of Energy announced it would start consolidating plutonium from other sites to South Carolina.

South Carolinians recognize there are national security and energy needs and it is the responsibility of all Americans to do what they can, which brings us to Yucca Mountain.

As a member of the EPW Committee last Congress, I participated in hearings and reviewed many of the issues regarding Yucca. My colleagues have some legitimate concerns, and they need to be dealt with accordingly – just like the Savannah River Site. And concerns can be addressed if met with a willingness to talk.

But millions of Americans that use nuclear energy have concerns as well. They have paid billions of dollars into the Nuclear Waste Fund and billions of those dollars have been spent to exhaustively study Yucca Mountain. Nuclear waste continues to fill the storage pools at nuclear stations, and energy companies continue to submit applications for new on site waste storage.

What I find perplexing is that people argue the environmental standards are not strict enough to justify opening Yucca. However, if Yucca cannot meet these standards, then no other location where nuclear waste currently resides can qualify either.

For instance, we have heard concerns that EPA's standard of 350 milirems of radiation per year is too high and could potentially endanger Nevada residents. Well the Dirksen Senate building could expose staffers to higher level than the EPA standard for Yucca, but we don't see calls to shut down this building.

We hear concerns about contaminating ground water in the desert. However, if the Savannah River Site, the Hanford Site, and other DOE locations were to store waste as the Majority Leader has proposed, then how do these sites which sit adjacent to major rivers pose less risk to Americans than a mountain located in an arid desert.

The truth is that opposition is based on politics, not on sound science. Thirty years ago the government made bad policy decisions with significant consequences. I fear we are repeating history.

We are debating Yucca Mountain, despite the fact that every branch of the federal government has spoken on the need to move forward. Now this committee is investigating the merits of Yucca before the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has received a license application or finalized the process.

As our nation continues to grow and our economy expands, we will need more energy. If we want to have energy security then we can't rely on renewable energy alone. Every source of energy has its' place in our energy portfolio, but we cannot escape the fact that nuclear energy must be a significant part of confronting our energy challenges.

Without Yucca, a nuclear renaissance will not occur, and without nuclear energy we will never see significant improvements to our environment. We should not set our nation back even further like the misguided policies of 30 years ago.

I applaud President Bush and the administration of every President since Carter for their strong support of Yucca Mountain. The energy needs of our nation will continue to require strong leadership from our Presidents for years to come.

Unfortunately, it appears politics is pushing a conclusion that will perpetuate bad policies, harm our economy, and ultimately damage our environment even more.