

House Bill Would Order Nuclear Reactor

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A key House committee has approved legislation requiring the Energy Department to begin development next year of a nuclear reactor that would produce tritium for the nation's nuclear warheads, generate electricity and burn plutonium as fuel.

The National Security Committee tacked the provision onto the defense authorization bill in an attempt to force the Energy Department's hand and stave off alternative technologies for the production of tritium, a radioactive gas used to enhance the power of nuclear explosions.

Energy Secretary Hazel R. O'Leary has pledged to begin work in fiscal 1996 on a new facility to produce triti-

um and sought \$50 million to initiate the decade-long, multibillion dollar program. She has promised to decide this summer whether to construct a reactor to do the job, as the nuclear industry and defense-minded members of Congress want, or to develop a powerful linear accelerator for the same purpose, as sought by anti-nuclear activists and environmentalists.

A reactor would be the first power-generating nuclear plant built in this country since the 1979 Three Mile Island accident and a huge boost for a dormant industry—which is why anti-nuclear activists and environmental groups prefer the accelerator, which would not involve a nuclear chain reaction or produce radioactive waste.

The Energy Department also is searching for a way to dispose of sur-

plus plutonium from the nation's shrinking nuclear weapons stockpile but is reluctant to use it as reactor fuel because it would undercut the Clinton administration's efforts to dissuade other nations from doing so. A few pounds of plutonium can be fashioned into an explosive device with relative ease, and U.S. policy frowns on making it commercially available.

The measure approved by the National Security Committee would force O'Leary's hand on both decisions. It would require the Energy Department to do what influential members of Congress such as committee Chairman Floyd Spence (R-S.C.) and his Senate counterpart, Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.), want it to do: accept the proposal of a nuclear industry consortium to build a plutonium-fueled,

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as New Source of Tritium

tritium-producing reactor at the Energy Department's Savannah River, S.C., weapons plant and sell the electricity generated to reduce the cost.

Tritium is a radioactive isotope of hydrogen, produced in the past by bombarding lithium targets with neutrons generated by nuclear reactors at Savannah River. But those reactors were shut down for safety reasons in the late 1980s, and the United States has no new source of tritium, which must be replaced periodically inside warheads because it decays at a rate of 5.5 percent a year.

Spence, Armed Services Committee Chairman Thurmond and other defense-minded members of Congress want work started quickly on a new facility because current supplies will run out about 2010 and they fear the

effect would be unilateral nuclear disarmament. Some members of Congress also believe that O'Leary and her aides have made up their minds to choose the theoretically workable but unproved accelerator technology. Energy Undersecretary Charles B. Curtis expressed "disappointment" that the committee would attempt to force the administration's hand on the choice of a tritium source and of a plutonium disposition method without conducting hearings on the issue.

He acknowledged that "at the programmatic level" among Energy Department officials, "there has in fact been identified a preferred option in favor of the accelerator. But the secretary, whose decision it is, has made clear she has not decided, and I can assure you that is a fact. She has not."



HAZEL R. O'LEARY

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