April 24, 2007

Dear Appropriations Member,

We are writing to urge you to deny the Department of Energy's $405 million request and provide zero funding for reprocessing nuclear fuel in the Fiscal Year 2008 Energy and Water Appropriations bill. We are categorically opposed to the proposal to restart reprocessing of commercial irradiated fuel in the United States that the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) is planning pursuant to its Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (GNEP) program. This proposal would significantly undermine US non-proliferation policy, cost taxpayers more than $100 billion, and yield numerous, hard-to-manage waste streams.

GNEP is a large-scale construction project, not a research and development program. When GNEP was first announced in February 2006, the Department of Energy (DOE) presented it to Congress largely as a long-term research and development program to develop "advanced recycling technologies." Only one year later, DOE is proposing to build a commercial-scale reprocessing facility and a full-scale fast reactor using existing technologies. In fact, DOE is currently considering eleven locations around the country for siting these facilities, and plans to select one or more sites in 2008. The stated goals of GNEP are to solve the proliferation and waste problems associated with nuclear power, but the necessary technologies, including "proliferation-resistant" and economically viable reprocessing and fast reactors, are in the early stages of research and, even according to US nuclear industry, many decades away from commercialization. It would be a huge waste of taxpayer dollars to build these large-scale facilities now with immature and polluting technologies.

If fully implemented, GNEP could cost $200 billion. DOE's FY2008 request of $405 million is more than double the FY2007 budget. If this program is funded in FY08, DOE will have spent more than $1 billion since FY2001 on reprocessing – but this represents only a small down-payment on an enormous program. According to a National Academy of Sciences' study in 1996, a reprocessing and transmutation program in the United States would cost $100 billion. The NAS estimate is only for existing U.S. irradiated fuel, and does not include waste produced as a result of 20-year license extensions, waste from new domestic reactors, or waste from foreign reactors that the administration's proposal envisions coming to the United States for reprocessing. With the additional waste, costs could soar to $200 billion. DOE has a long track record of not being able to complete large nuclear construction projects on time and on budget. For example, a proposal to build a fast reactor at Clinch River in Tennessee in the1970s was stopped by Congress in 1982 when the costs escalated from an estimated $400 million to $8.8 billion.

GNEP will undermine U.S. non-proliferation efforts. DOE repeatedly states that it does not want to use reprocessing technology that results in separated plutonium. However, DOE is proposing to use technologies that result in a mix of plutonium with uranium, which is considered "direct use material" by the International Atomic Energy Agency and must be secured to the same standard as separated plutonium. Reprocessing will create stockpiles of nuclear weapons-usable material, as is the case in France, the UK, Japan, and Russia. Globally, commercial reprocessing has resulted in 250 metric tons of separated plutonium – enough to

make 30,000 nuclear weapons. Rather than discouraging other countries from reprocessing as DOE claims, a U.S. program will provide political cover for countries seeking to justify or legitimize their efforts to obtain this technology.

GNEP will create more highly radioactive waste streams. Reprocessing is the most polluting part of the nuclear fuel cycle. The only private commercial reprocessing facility in the United States, West Valley in New York State, which was shut down after only six years of operation resulted in radioactive waste that still threatens the groundwater and the Great Lakes watershed more than 30 years later. DOE's 1996 estimate for the cleanup cost for the part of the site that did reprocessing is $5.2 billion. The U.S. also used reprocessing to create plutonium for nuclear weapons, which resulted in highly radioactive liquid waste in tanks at Hanford, Savannah River Site, and Idaho National Laboratory that continues to threaten important water resources, including the Columbia and Savannah Rivers and the Snake River Plain Aquifer. Tens of billions of dollars will be required over several decades to continue cleanup at these sites.

Fast reactors, a crucial component to GNEP, are not commercially viable. Fast reactors are essential to implementing DOE's stated goal of dealing with the nuclear waste. If GNEP were to substantially reduce the amount of nuclear waste destined for a repository, one fast reactor would have to be constructed for approximately every two or three light-water reactors (the kind of reactor used in the United States now). Countries, including the United States, have been trying unsuccessfully to develop fast reactors for 50 years and the results have all been technical and economic failures. In the United States, a small fast reactor, Fermi 1, had a partial nuclear meltdown in October 1966 and a sodium fire in 1970. The reactor was closed in 1972. The only full-scale fast reactor currently operating, the Russian BN-600, has had fifteen sodium fires in the past 23 years.

DOE is rushing into full-scale reprocessing without the necessary technologies that would fulfill its stated goals, thus creating new problems while solving none of the existing challenges of dealing with nuclear waste. Now is the time to zero out funding for this program before any premature construction and taxpayer investment begins toward what promises to be yet another DOE boondoggle and failed program. We urge you to not allow the DOE to pursue this dangerous, expensive, and polluting proposal.

Sincerely,

National Organizations

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