

SAMPLE LETTER

September 17, 2008

The Honorable Daniel K. Akaka
United States Senate
141 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510-1103

Dear Senator Akaka:

We are writing to ask you to oppose inclusion of any provision that supports nuclear waste reprocessing currently proposed in the off-shore drilling bill.

The most recent draft of the New Energy Reform Act of 2008 (the so-called "Gang of 20" bill) directs the Secretary of Energy to begin construction of a research and development (R&D) facility for spent fuel reprocessing. Government support for reprocessing would come at a heavy cost to taxpayers, and involves polluting and technically flawed technologies. It would also exacerbate nuclear proliferation risks, at a time when these are among the gravest threats to U.S. security, while doing nothing practical to alleviate U.S. nuclear waste problems of immediate concern.

Reprocessing Will Cost Taxpayers and Ratepayers Billions of Dollars

According to DOE estimates from March 2006, a reprocessing R&D facility alone would cost \$1.5 billion. This taxpayer subsidy represents a small fraction of the massive government investment necessary for any commercial-scale reprocessing program.

According to a recent estimate by an Argonne National Laboratory scientist, the cost premium associated with building and operating a plant capable of reprocessing all the spent fuel generated by the current U.S. reactor fleet would be \$3 billion to \$4.5 billion per year. This estimate does not include the cost of building and operating the dozens of "fast neutron reactors" that the Department of Energy (DOE) hopes to build to use the 20 metric tons of plutonium produced each year by such a plant. Most fast reactors in the world have been shut down due to costs and operational problems. According to the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) in 1996, the total cost of a reprocessing and fast reactor program could be more than \$700 billion (in 2007 dollars).

Reprocessing Lacks Industry Support and Won't Reduce Nuclear Waste

The nuclear industry itself has not committed any private funding to support reprocessing. Industry officials together with numerous other stakeholders issued a 2007 report, published by the Keystone Center, which concluded that "reprocessing of spent fuel will not be cost-effective in the foreseeable future" and "does not eliminate the need for a geologic repository." Given the private sector's reluctance to invest the billions needed to support reprocessing, taxpayers and ratepayers will be stuck not only with the R&D costs of a reprocessing facility, but also with the entire cost of a future industrial-scale reprocessing program, which will not reduce the volume of nuclear waste.

DOE Doesn't Need a New Reprocessing Facility

Since the White House unveiled the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (GNEP) in 2006, the program has stalled and support for reprocessing has faded. Appropriators' skepticism about the Bush administration's reprocessing program is well founded. The DOE's FY 2008 Budget requested \$405 million for reprocessing programs, but Congress approved less than half the request, \$179 million, for related R&D activities, while the Senate Appropriations Committee barred all funding beyond conceptual design for new reprocessing facilities. House appropriators eliminated all funding for GNEP in the FY 2009 House Energy & Water Development Appropriations bill report. Even DOE revised its plans recently and opted against the construction of a new reprocessing R&D facility, planning instead to use existing facilities for GNEP's R&D activities rather than build new ones. Congress should not compel the DOE to build a costly facility that it no longer wants.

Reprocessing Increases the Risks of Nuclear Terrorism

Reprocessing extracts nuclear weapon-usable material in an easy-to-steal form and therefore poses a major risk of nuclear terrorism. In addition to raising serious doubts about the viability of U.S. commercial reprocessing, a 2008 Government Accountability Office (GAO) evaluation of reprocessing and the GNEP program also outlined grave nuclear proliferation concerns about reprocessing. The GAO report specifically noted that advanced technologies for reprocessing spent nuclear fuel would pose a "greater risk of proliferation in comparison with direct disposal in a geologic repository." DOE's current preferred technology for U.S. reprocessing plants would separate a mixture of uranium and plutonium and not be significantly more difficult for terrorists to steal and process than pure plutonium. The 2007 Keystone report also singled out GNEP's proliferation threat and concluded the program was not capable of resolving "the weapons proliferation problem."

Reprocessing Increases Environmental Contamination

Reprocessing plants release massive quantities of radioactive gases and other effluents, increasing the hazards to the public and the environment of nuclear waste handling. The environmental controls needed to effectively capture these effluents would make reprocessing even more expensive. For this reason, the nuclear industry is proposing that the Environmental Protection Agency weaken its limits on the release of radioisotopes such as krypton-85 from reprocessing plants.

For these reasons, **we urge you to eliminate any legislative language that would authorize federal expenditures for nuclear waste reprocessing.**

Respectfully,

National Organizations

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Safe Energy Program
Physicians for Social Responsibility

Tom Clements, Senior Advisor
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Global Green USA (The US affiliate of
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