

February 25, 2016
The Honorable Ernest J. Moniz
Secretary of Energy
U.S. Department of Energy
1000 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20585-1000

Dear Secretary Moniz,

We are writing to follow up on our September 8 letter to you about the mixed-oxide (MOX) plutonium fuel fabrication project at Savannah River. Now that President Obama has made the principled decision to zero out funding for continuing the project, its defenders, both on and off the Hill, are trying to restore construction funding by making arms control arguments. They argue that the 2000 United States-Russia agreement on disposition of surplus weapons plutonium obligates the United States to complete the plant. That is incorrect.

In fact, the agreement explicitly allows each side to change plutonium disposition methods and was already modified once in 2010 to allow Russia to pursue an alternative disposition approach to its own MOX program, which, like ours today, was judged to be too expensive to complete. As long as our government pursues a reasonable alternative to dispose of the surplus material, the agreement is not a barrier to doing so.

More important, there are major arms control, nonproliferation, and nuclear security considerations relating to this project that strongly favor its termination. As we noted in our previous letter, despite the unfavorable economics, there are increased political pressures to proceed with plutonium separation in Japan and China, and to gain US consent for reprocessing in South Korea. While the plans are to produce plutonium fuel for power reactors, the same plutonium could be used to produce thousands of warheads.

It is especially worrisome that the subject of reprocessing has increasingly been raised in Japan and South Korea in the context of nuclear-weapon options. For example, shortly after North Korea's latest nuclear-weapon test, both South Korea's ruling party parliamentary floor leader and the party's chief policy maker publicly urged that South Korea pursue nuclear reprocessing as a military hedge.

Meanwhile, Japan's government wants to start operations at its large Rokkasho reprocessing plant but is worried about American reactions to the huge increases in Japan's plutonium stockpile that will result. Officials there seek automatic US renewal of the US-Japan nuclear cooperative agreement in 2018, so as to avoid having to discuss the proliferation implications of Japan's plutonium policy with the U.S. government. Japan is the only non-weapon state that reprocesses today.

Beijing is also interested in recycling plutonium. It is negotiating with France for the purchase of a Rokkasho-size reprocessing plant. China, of course, is a nuclear weapon country, but plutonium nominally stockpiled for future breeder reactors also would allow the country to rapidly scale up its nuclear-weapon stockpile by an order of magnitude.

There are officials in each of the three governments who oppose the costly and dangerous plutonium recycle programs that are being proposed. If we fail to terminate our MOX program, though, we will have far less credibility to engage them in efforts to restrain such activities in East Asia.

In short, contrary to the claims of its defenders, the arms-control and nuclear security arguments weigh heavily for ending the MOX project, not for continuing it.

Sincerely,

Peter Bradford, Vermont Law School, former U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commissioner

Joseph Cirincione, President, The Ploughshares Fund; former professional staff member, House Armed Services Committee

Robert Einhorn, Senior Fellow, The Brookings Institution; former Assistant Secretary of State for Nonproliferation

David Freeman, former Chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority Board of Directors

Ambassador Robert Gallucci, Georgetown University, former Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs

Richard Garwin, IBM Fellow Emeritus, Thomas J. Watson Research Center

Victor Gilinsky, Energy Consultant, former U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commissioner

Jessica Matthews, Distinguished Fellow, The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; former Director of the Office of Global Issues, The National Security Council

Joseph Nye, Harvard, John F. Kennedy School of Government, former Chairman of the National Intelligence Council

Ambassador Thomas Pickering, Distinguished Fellow, The Brookings Institution; former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations

Gary Samore, Executive Director for Research, Belfer Center, Harvard University; former White House Coordinator for Arms Control and Weapons of Mass Destruction

Henry Sokolski, Executive Director, The Nonproliferation Policy Education Center; former Deputy for Nonproliferation Policy, Department of Defense

Frank von Hippel, Senior Research Physicist, Professor of Public and International Affairs (emeritus), Princeton University; former Assistant Director for National Security, White House Office of Science and Technology

CC: National Security Advisor Ambassador Susan Rice

Secretary of State John Kerry
Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter
Senator Lamar Alexander, Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee
on Energy and Water

Senator Diane Feinstein, Ranking Member of the Senate Appropriations
Subcommittee on Energy and Water

Congressman Mike Simpson, Chairman of the House Appropriations
Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development and Related Agencies

Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur, Ranking Member of the House Appropriations
Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development and Related Agencies

Senator Jeff Sessions, Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on
Strategic Forces

Senator Joe Donnelly, Ranking Member of the Senate Armed Services
Subcommittee on Strategic Forces

Congressman Mike Rogers, Chairman of the House Armed Services
Subcommittee on Strategic Forces

Congressman Jim Cooper, Ranking Member of the House Armed Services
Subcommittee on Strategic Forces