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Time to move ahead on nuclear waste disposal

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Guest columnist

Finding a consensus about anything concerning energy policy is rare these days. But there is one extremely important area of consensus emerging: Given the threat of terrorist attacks, every effort should be made to meet the schedule that Congress has set for the safe disposal of highly radioactive spent fuel in an underground repository.

About 40 million metric tons of spent fuel now are stored in cooling ponds and concrete casks at nuclear power plants around the country. Here in South Carolina, about 3,000 metric tons of spent fuel are kept at nuclear plants. Although the spent fuel is being stored safely and securely, these facilities are temporary; they were not designed for permanent storage.

Last year Congress gave final approval to a plan to construct a permanent repository deep underground at Yucca Mountain in Nevada and directed the Energy Department to begin disposing of the waste by 2010.

Concerned about delays in getting the facility licensed and built, a coalition of Republicans and Democrats in the House is urging Congress to put a stop to the government's decades-old practice of diverting money from the nuclear waste program to offset the federal budget deficit. Since 1982, more than \$22 billion has been paid into a special nuclear-waste fund, but only about \$7 billion has been allocated to the nuclear waste project. The unobligated balance winds up in the U.S. Treasury.

The Nuclear Waste Policy Act requires nuclear power customers — homes and businesses — to pay a monthly fee of one-tenth of a cent for each kilowatt-hour of electricity they use. But less than one-third of the money is being used for waste management. Even though the U.S. House appropriated \$765 million for the project in its fiscal year 2004 legislation — an amount that would keep the project on schedule — Congress has now approved only \$580 million. That's \$200 million less than is needed, and \$200 million less than what taxpayers are paying specifically for this project.

In fact, the waste-management budget for fiscal year 2004 is jeopardizing the success of the entire program. Opponents who failed in their attempts to block the project from receiving congressional approval are now trying to starve the project to death. The best way to correct this is to move spending for the waste program out of the regular budget process, so that work on Yucca Mountain can be accelerated despite political pressures and the overall budget deficit.

Denying the repository project an adequate amount of funding is essentially stealing money from the taxpayers who were required to support the waste management project. It means the repository might not open on schedule, requiring more money to be spent on decentralized temporary storage facilities until the repository becomes available.

It means that nuclear power plants in some states might be forced to close, if states fearful of becoming de facto long-term storage sites deny requests to build more concrete casks for spent fuel coming from the plants. It means the possible loss of nuclear plants that provide much-needed electricity reliably

without polluting the air or releasing greenhouse gases. It means further delay in transporting high-level waste from the defense program for disposal at Yucca Mountain.

It is time to face the problems created by the diversion of waste-management funds rather than resort to outworn slogans from opponents of nuclear power about how better off we would be if spent fuel were to remain at the nuclear plant sites.

This is the juncture at which Congress should consider the broad implications of its commitment to nuclear waste disposal. The experience of recent years can inform the debate, but the bulk of the action on waste disposal lies ahead.

The record shows that since the advent of nuclear electricity more than 40 years ago, scientific organizations around the world have examined the issue of radioactive waste management. Almost all have reached the same conclusion. The National Research Council's Board on Radioactive Waste Management expressed it this way: "There is a strong worldwide consensus that the best, safest long-term option for dealing with high-level waste is geological isolation."

The government should get on with it.

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