

## House Panel Reassured on Nonproliferation Policy

The House Committee on Foreign Affairs, concerned about reports that U.S. nuclear nonproliferation policy is softening, has received reassurances from the State Department that international transfers of plutonium will not be sanctioned—at least not in the absence of a new regime of safeguards that can keep such fissionable material from being diverted to the making of nuclear bombs.

Transfer of plutonium derived from uranium fuel of U.S. origin—or from fuel irradiated in U.S.-built reactors—will, if permitted at all, be only for the purpose of facilitating a limited amount of research and development on the economic feasibility of breeder reactors. These assurances are deemed significant because they come at a time when the 63-nation International Fuel Cycle Evaluation Conference (INFCE), which the Carter Administration organized in 1977, is winding up its work and many countries may accept the view that large-scale development of breeder reactors and fuel reprocessing for recovery of plutonium is desirable. Implicit in this view is an international plutonium regime and economy in which the movement of plutonium among countries might become common.

Representative Clement J. Zablocki (D-Wis.), chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and Representative Jonathan B. Bingham (D-N.Y.), head of the subcommittee on international economic policy, were concerned when two prominent government consultants—Henry Rowen of Stanford University and Albert Wohlstetter of the University of Chicago—circulated a report early this fall stating that the State Department was shifting away from a policy of “opposition to fuel cycles that increase access to readily fissionable materials . . .” (*Science*, 5 October).

The congressmen’s response came in mid-October when they summoned several high State Department officials, including Ambassador-at-Large Gerard C. Smith and Assistant Secretary Thomas R. Pickering, to a private, closed-door meeting, with Rowen and Wohlstetter also present. But as the meeting turned out, there was no con-

frontation because Ambassador Smith and his associates said what Zablocki and Bingham wanted to hear.

On 25 October the two congressmen wrote Smith a letter setting forth their understanding of the assurances received. For instance, with respect to proposed international transfers of plutonium for breeder R & D, the letter said “every effort will be made to define ‘research’ in such a way that it does not become an open gate for plutonium transfers.”

In some cases the “possibility of designing innovative programs through which countries might make use of critical experimentation centers in the U.S.,” will be examined, the letter said. Further, it said the “U.S. intends to stress more emphatically than in the past that proliferation costs must seriously be addressed in planning, and in determining the feasibility of, breeders and advanced fuel cycles.”

## Carter Says No to WIPP, but DOE May Appeal

President Carter has said no to the controversial Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP), which the Department of Energy wants to build in New Mexico. But DOE officials are still trying to keep the WIPP project alive.

As recently as last spring, WIPP was to have been a repository for transuranic waste from the nuclear weapons program and a limited amount of spent fuel from commercial power reactors. A principal DOE rationale for the project was to “exercise” the Nuclear Regulatory Commission’s licensing process. But the House Armed Services Committee later insisted that WIPP be an unlicensed facility for transuranic waste alone, and DOE acquiesced.

The President’s decision, which has not yet been announced, was made in late October after he had received a White House option paper based largely on the work of the waste management Interagency Review Group (IRG). A majority of the IRG member agencies (with DOE as the lone dissenter) recommended that the WIPP project be terminated, and the President agreed.

Questions had been raised as to

the suitability of the site, a major one being that potash and possibly natural gas are present and might invite intrusions in centuries to come. Also, the IRG felt repositories for military transuranic wastes should be subject to NRC licensing. DOE itself had concurred in this, and some of the other IRG agencies were disturbed when DOE later acceded to the Armed Services Committee position against licensing.

The option elected by the President, in keeping with the recommendation of the IRG majority, was to plan to have a licensed repository built for transuranic wastes and some high-level wastes once two or three sites have been “qualified” for this purpose. The WIPP site, on a bedded salt formation near Carlsbad, could be one of these if found to be suitable. But DOE officials have now asked that the decision on WIPP not be foreclosed until the new Secretary of Energy, Charles Duncan, has decided whether he wishes to ask the President to reconsider it.

Last year DOE promised the state of New Mexico a “right of concurrence” (or, in effect, a state veto right) with respect to WIPP. But under the House-passed Armed Services Committee bill now awaiting action in House-Senate conference, the WIPP



John Deutch

Photo by E. Poggenpohl

project could be built even if the state decides to oppose it. Thus, if DOE continues to seek presidential support of WIPP as the project is now envisioned by the House committee, the department will be acting contrary to its promise on state concurrence as well as to its past commitment to the principle of NRC licensing.

John Deutch, DOE’s undersecretary and its representative to the IRG, is afraid that termination of WIPP would be perceived by the public as another setback for a waste management program that has known much frustration and failure.

**Luther J. Carter**