NRC Stands by Its Rule on University Reactors

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) has decided, against the advice of its own staff, that the use of bomb-grade nuclear fuel in university and industry research facilities must be eliminated. On 19 June, the five commission members agreed to implement a rule proposed by the NRC in August of 1984 requiring research reactor operators to convert their facilities to low-enriched uranium.

A staff report delivered to the commissioners on 14 June argued that conversion to low-enriched fuel could not be justified on a cost-benefit basis. Furthermore, global nonproliferation efforts would be bolstered only marginally by converting the estimated 26 affected U.S. research reactors, the staff noted. Instead of mandating a switch to low-enriched uranium, the report suggested that the NRC should wait for Congress to take legislative action, or recommend that reactor operators make the switch voluntarily.

In recent weeks, however, the NRC has been pressed by the Congress and public interest groups to implement the proposed 1984 rule. Legislators and activists have argued that the United States cannot expect foreign countries to convert their research facilities to low-enriched fuel to reduce nuclear proliferation risks if the United States does not do the same.

To address university concerns about the costs of making these fuel conversions, the NRC ordered its staff to draft legislation to cover the conversion cost, which is estimated at $12 million to $16 million. The NRC members also called for the immediate removal of any excess highly enriched unirradiated fuel now present at research reactors.—**MARK CRAWFORD**

Europe Agrees on Joint Defense Research Program

Five areas of advanced technology have been chosen by the defense ministers of Western European nations to launch a new program of long-term, cooperative research aimed at meeting their mutual defense needs while reducing overall costs and avoiding duplication (*Science*, 26 April, p. 475).

According to the Dutch minister of defense, Jacob de Ruiter, the identification of these five areas represents the first major attempt in Europe to encourage cooperation in defense research at a multinational level.

The areas, in each of which projects will be funded on a case-by-case basis, are compound materials, image processing, microelectronics, high-strength lightweight materials, and conventional warhead design. They have been selected from a list of 30 areas of possible research collaboration in defense-related technologies drawn up by the Independent European Program Group (IEPG), which is responsible for coordinating the procurement policies of the European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Other topics from this list are currently being closely studied for future opportunities to launch joint projects. Michael Heseltine, the British Secretary of State for Defense who was largely responsible for promoting the initiative within the IEPG, has promised to host a meeting in London of the directors of different national research organizations in Europe to study ways of taking it further.

A final communiqué issued at the end of last week's meeting in London emphasized that the ministers had agreed to work in parallel with French plans for a "European Research Coordination Agency" (Eureka), and also underlined the importance of maintaining a dialogue with the United States on research in advanced technologies with military applications.

—**DAVID DICKSON**

Comings and Goings

Donald Kerr, director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, has resigned to become a senior vice president at EG&G Inc., a defense contractor, in Wellesley, Massachusetts. He will leave Los Alamos on 1 October.

William Pollin has resigned after 6 years as director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse. **Jerome Jaffe**, head of the agency's Addiction Research Center, will serve as acting director until a new one is found.

DOE Faces Suit Over Enrichment Decision

Representative Marilyn Lloyd (D–Tenn.) has filed suit against the Department of Energy (DOE) in an attempt to prevent closure of the uranium enrichment plant in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. The department, faced with a disastrous combination of climbing costs and plummeting orders for enriched uranium, recently announced that it would put the Oak Ridge plant on "standby" and cease work on a new facility in Portsmouth, Ohio, in which it has invested nearly $3 billion (*Science*, 21 June, p. 1407).

Lloyd, who represents Oak Ridge and chairs a subcommittee that oversees DOE's energy research programs, claims that the department should have prepared a lengthy analysis of the environmental consequences of shutting the plant before it acted.

Lloyd is angry because she says she had a commitment that if the Oak Ridge plant were closed, it would be shut down over a period of 3 to 4 years. DOE has decided to take the facility out of production immediately, however, and put it on standby in case it is needed in the 1990's. In other words, the department is not actually closing the plant, so the earlier commitment has not been broken.

The lawsuit is not the only problem DOE has encountered in its attempt to rescue its $2-billion-a-year enrichment business. It is currently negotiating with the Office of Management and Budget over how much money will eventually have to be paid back to the Treasury Department for investments it is hoping to write off.

The enrichment program is required by law to cover costs with fees paid by utility companies for enrichment services. According to an analysis by the General Accounting Office, some $6 billion is still owed for construction costs of the now-abandoned Portsmouth facility, capital investments made over the past decade in DOE's other enrichment facilities, and interest charges. DOE would like simply to write off some of that debt, but OMB and Congress are likely to object because such a move would be tantamount to subsidizing nuclear fuel costs.—**COLIN NORMAN**