Press Statement by Kevin Kamps, Radioactive Waste Watchdog, Beyond Nuclear

regarding Energy Secretary Steven Chu’s proposed expansion of nuclear reactor loan guarantees and announcement of radioactive waste “blue ribbon commission”

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Kevin Kamps press statement:

“The Obama administration’s proposal to more than double the size of the Energy Department’s nuclear power loan guarantee program, from $20.5 billion to $54.5 billion, is objectionable. The Congressional Budget Office has predicted that more than half of new reactor projects will default on their loan repayments, meaning federal loan guarantees will leave taxpayers holding the bag for many billions of dollars per failed project. This expansion of the nuclear loan guarantee program, benefitting an industry that has already been heavily subsidized for over fifty years, will come at the expense of the real solutions to the climate crisis, such as efficiency and renewable sources like wind and solar power.

Energy Secretary Chu’s choice of leadership and membership of his radioactive waste blue ribbon commission raises some hopes, as well as some red flags.

Very hopefully, Co-chair Lee Hamilton, who helped lead the 9/11 Commission, will already be familiar with the vulnerability of high-level radioactive wastes to catastrophic terrorist attack. After all, the 9/11 Commission reported that the original Al Qaeda plan called for ten hijacked aircraft, with two targeted at nuclear facilities, very likely including the Entergy Nuclear Indian Point atomic reactors near New York City. Alleged 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed was quoted by a reporter in 2002 before his capture that such a radiological attack had been decided against in 2001 so that “things would not get out of hand,” but that such attacks had not been ruled out in the future.

Unfortunately, nearly a decade after 9/11, high-level radioactive waste storage pools across the U.S. remain vulnerable to attack and catastrophic radioactivity releases. Thus, they represent pre-deployed dirty bombs in our backyard, awaiting detonation. The NRC has reported a storage pool drained of its cooling water could result in a radioactive waste inferno that would cause 25,000 fatal cancers downwind, out to distances as far away as 500 miles. As the national environmental movement has urged ever since the 2001 attacks, hardened on-site storage for high-level radioactive waste must be implemented as an interim national security measure of the utmost priority.

Hopefully, Co-chair Scowcroft’s experience as National Security Advisor to President Ford will mean the rejection of radioactive waste reprocessing due to its inherent nuclear weapons proliferation risks. President Ford banned U.S. exports of reprocessing in 1976 in response to India’s use of U.S. technology and training to extract plutonium from reactor waste to detonate its first nuclear device in 1974. The end of U.S. commercial nuclear waste reprocessing in 1972
has set a good example, followed by such countries as Argentina, Brazil, South Korea, and Taiwan, which likely prevented nuclear arms races in those volatile regions.

However, several members chosen by Chu to serve on the radioactive waste blue ribbon commission raise red flags.

Pete Domenici, former Republican U.S. Senator from New Mexico, has a decades-long record of working to benefit the nuclear power industry at the expense of taxpayers, as well as at the risk of public health and environmental protection. In 2005, his Energy Policy Act gave birth to the nuclear power loan guarantee program, which would put the high financial risk of new reactors onto the backs of American taxpayers. In 2006, he proposed legislation to empower the U.S. Energy Secretary to override state governors and attorney generals in the siting of centralized storage facilities for high-level radioactive waste. Fortunately this bill failed, for it would have launched large numbers of risky irradiated nuclear fuel shipments – “Mobile Chernobyls” and “dirty bombs on wheels” – onto the roads, rails, and waterways of most states, bound for de facto permanent open air “parking lot dumps.”

Former U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission Chairman Richard Meserve presided over the near-disaster at the Davis-Besse nuclear power plant near Toledo in 2002. Meserve and other senior NRC managers overrode the decision by NRC safety staff to shut down Davis-Besse for an emergency inspection. This allowed the reactor to come precariously close to breaching a severely corroded reactor lid, which would have led to a loss-of-coolant-accident, core meltdown, and potentially catastrophic radioactivity release. Shortly after the NRC Office of Inspector General reported that both NRC and nuclear utility FirstEnergy Nuclear had prioritized company profits over public health and safety at Davis-Besse, Meserve resigned his NRC chairmanship a year early.

The appointment of John Rowe, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of Exelon Nuclear Corporation, is nothing short of shocking. Exelon, the largest nuclear utility in the country, correspondingly is responsible for generating the largest stockpile of commercial high-level radioactive waste. Rowe’s bias and conflict of interest is clear. He wants the radioactive waste problem off the radar screen of public concern, so his company can build new reactors and continue running a large number of old ones. This can lead to short cuts on safety, security, and environmental protection in regards to high-level radioactive waste management, in order to boost Exelon’s profit margin. Besides this, Rowe and other Exelon executives have long been major campaign contributors to President Obama’s career, raising appearances of political pay back.

Contrary to President Obama’s State of the Union speech calling for an expansion of “clean and safe” nuclear power, atomic reactors and the entire uranium fuel chain are dirty, dangerous, and expensive.”
Beyond Nuclear aims to educate and activate the public about the connections between nuclear power and nuclear weapons and the need to abandon both to safeguard our future. Beyond Nuclear advocates for an energy future that is sustainable, benign and democratic.