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Date: Sat, 17 Dec 2005 14:48:24 -0500

Subject: letter

From: "Tom Randall" <trandall@winningreen.com> [View Contact Details](#) [Add Mobile Alert](#)

To: "Gerald Marsh" <geraldmarsh63@yahoo.com>, "George Stanford" <gstanford@aya.yale.edu>

The wrong way to get cheap electricity

December 16, 2005

Advertisement

Tom Randall's too-good-to-be-true scheme to obtain "virtually limitless electricity" by reprocessing spent fuel from nuclear power plants and "recycling" it in a new generation of fast reactors ["Nuclear waste a nearly limitless source of electricity," Business commentary, Dec. 8] would not work, while exacerbating the safety and security risks posed by spent nuclear fuel and costing U.S. taxpayers a fortune.

All spent fuel contains plutonium that can be used to make nuclear weapons. But spent fuel also contains highly radioactive isotopes that protect the plutonium from being stolen by making the mixture too hazardous to handle. Reprocessing separates the plutonium from this radiation barrier, making it more accessible to terrorists and nations seeking nuclear bombs, which is why the United States banned reprocessing in 1977. Even the "pyroprocessing" technology that Randall touts was evaluated in the 1970s and rejected as too proliferation-prone.

Reprocessing is also extremely expensive. Although President Ronald Reagan lifted the ban on reprocessing in the 1980s, the nuclear industry spurned it for the much cheaper option of disposing of spent fuel in a geologic repository.

A 1999 study by the Energy Department found that a scheme similar to

Randall's would cost \$316 billion (in 2004 dollars).

Pyroprocessing doesn't even work. In 2001, the Energy Department began a 12-year campaign to pyroprocess the 27 tons of spent fuel generated by an experimental fast reactor in Idaho. But in 2003, the department decided to search for an alternative after numerous problems caused the estimated completion time to balloon to 30 years.

Exelon and other utilities should continue to oppose reprocessing. Focusing government resources on an elusive technological fantasy would undermine the already dwindling political support for a geologic repository, assuring that spent fuel will continue to pile up at nuclear plants with no viable alternative in sight. The United States needs an approach to its nuclear waste problem that is cost-effective and grounded in reality, not wishful thinking.

**Edwin S. Lyman, senior staff scientist,
Union of Concerned Scientists, Washington, D.C**

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