Miss. Nuclear Waste Plan Sparks Early Opposition

JEFF AMY, Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — The Mississippi Energy Institute is pushing for more exploration of storing and reprocessing used nuclear fuel in the state at the same time that one of the its congressmen is coming out against it.

Leaders of the institute, which promotes energy development, pitched ideas Monday to the state Senate Economic Development Committee. Jason Dean, who works for a unit of the Butler Snow law firm, said Mississippi should explore interim storage and reprocessing of fuel rods. He said receiving used fuel rods and reprocessing them could create 4,000 permanent jobs and $30 million a year in taxes.

"We see fuel rods no longer as a waste product, but as a commodity," Dean said.

He said the proposal doesn't include permanent underground storage, saying that's the role for the stalled Yucca Mountain repository in Nevada. Instead, Mississippi would accept the waste in giant concrete casks, reuse most of it and ship the remainder to Nevada.

But the Energy Institute also touts Mississippi's "unique geologic salt domes," in a two-page proposal for a "nuclear cluster" that it has published. That's an echo of a proposal to entomb nuclear waste in the Richton salt dome that sparked public opposition in the 1980s. Richton was an also-ran in the federal site selection process that designated Yucca Mountain, as was another nearby Mississippi salt dome, Cypress Creek.

U.S. Rep. Steven Palazzo, the Biloxi Republican who represents Richton and the rest of south Mississippi, opposes the idea. He and U.S. Rep Alan Nunnelee, R-Tupelo, are supposed to meet with the Energy Institute Tuesday to hear the proposal.

"Whatever plans are brewing for a possible nuclear waste facility, I think now is the time to send a clear message: No nuclear waste in Mississippi. Not now, not ever," Palazzo said in a statement. "Nuclear storage wouldn't even be an issue had the Obama administration not shuttered plans to complete the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste repository in Nevada."

Right now, it's illegal to reprocess nuclear fuel in the United States, a ban in place since the 1970s. There's also a state law against storing nuclear material underground.

"They're putting the cart before the horse," said Louie Miller, the state director of the Sierra Club and an opponent of the idea. "What if we move all these casks into

storage here and the federal law is never reversed and we're left holding the bag? You're not going to convince me they're not going to use the Richton salt dome."

But some other countries do reprocess fuel. The Energy Institute's board includes the CEO of the American unit of Areva SA, a French firm that reprocesses nuclear fuel at Le Havre, France, among other businesses.

The company was "probably very important in bringing the idea to the table in Mississippi," said Patrick Sullivan, the institute's president.

The institute board also includes a vice president of New Orleans-based Entergy Corp.'s nuclear operations, which operates the Grand Gulf nuclear plant near Port Gibson, and a representative of Mississippi Power Co., whose parent firm operates nuclear plants in Alabama and Georgia.

Dean said some state and local officials have indicated that they're interested in more information. Sullivan said the institute has talked to economic developers in southwest Mississippi, near Grand Gulf. Dean said the idea is that a community would agree to host the plant.

Dean said that South Carolina, Idaho, Texas, Kentucky, New Mexico and Nevada are also under consideration for interim storage. He said two sites, one in the eastern half of the country and one in the western half, are likely. However, Congress never designated a permanent storage site in the eastern part of the country after it named the first one in Nevada.

"What we're doing is putting Mississippi in the position of solving a serious, intractable problem," Dean said.

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