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Foreign fuel at Barnwell would not be state's first

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COLUMBIA — If the Barnwell reprocessing plant opens its doors to foreign nuclear fuel, the event will mark another chapter in South Carolina's 18-year history as an international center for foreign nuclear shipments.

The Reagan administration has offered reprocessing services to Mexican officials if commercial reprocessing becomes a reality in the United States. Such Mexican shipments of fuel into this country, however, would join shipments from a dozen other nations.

Nuclear fuel shipments from 12 foreign nations enter South Carolina each year from seaports in Charleston and Savannah for overland transport to the Savannah River Plant, a federal nuclear weapons center that lies a short distance from the Barnwell facility.



By Chris Weston
The News capital bureau

The Savannah River Plant, near Aiken, has been receiving shipments of spent nuclear fuel from foreign nations for reprocessing or disposal since 1964, under the auspices of international agreements dating back to the 1950s.

In 1980, 85 shipments of spent nuclear reactor fuel were sent to South Carolina for reprocessing or storage at the Savannah River Plant. Of those shipments, 52 were from foreign nations, according to Department of Energy documents.

While the possibility that foreign nuclear shipments may be sent sometime in the future to the Barnwell plant has stirred some concern in the state, current shipments have generated little concern among state and federal officials most critical of the state's role as a nuclear dumping ground.

Whether the Barnwell plant will open for commercial reprocessing is still an open question. But congressional and administration officials said last week an agreement is almost complete for the sale of the plant to new owners intent on starting reprocessing in the state.

The nearby Savannah River Plant has been the home, since 1954, of some of the world's most dangerous nuclear components. Currently, about 23 million gallons of high-level radioactive wastes sit in temporary storage in partially buried tanks at the 300-square-mile complex that sprawls over parts of Aiken, Allendale and Barnwell counties.

4-1-82

Most of that waste has been created by the plant's weapons production operations. But the regular shipments of spent fuel from foreign nations have nothing to do with producing nuclear weapons — the receipt of the shipments is little more than a foreign relations tool, a courtesy to other countries.

Offer to Mexico similar

In a similar manner, according to Reagan administration documents, the United States is offering Mexico an abundance of American technology to help its fledgling nuclear power program. In that vein, key administration officials have offered Mexico the use of a private reprocessing plant, presumably Barnwell, to reprocess spent fuel — if the plant ever opens its doors.

If the plant should begin operation, the receipt of spent nuclear fuel from foreign nations for reprocessing should come as no surprise. The current owners of the plant, Allied General Nuclear Services, have always envisioned an international market.

Dr. James A. Buckham, the chief operating officer for the consortium that owns the Barnwell plant, said that if the plant were currently operating, it would be at least 10 years before Mexico's nuclear program would be advanced enough to begin shipping spent nuclear fuel.

And, according to Department of Energy documents, shipments of foreign nuclear waste into South Carolina would not break new ground.

Since 1964, South Carolina has received nuclear fuel shipments from Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, South Africa, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, Japan, Sweden and Canada, according to DOE documents.

In 1978, the level of shipments of spent nuclear fuel into the state from foreign nations increased considerably because France withdrew from the international reprocessing market on fuel used in the world's test reactors, said R.C. Webb, a DOE spokesman at the Savannah River Plant.

The 85 shipments of nuclear fuel received in South Carolina during 1980 contained 1,495 nuclear fuel assemblies, which contained more than 450 kilograms of uranium, according to DOE documents.

The South Carolina nuclear weapons facility will take spent fuel, under existing international agreements, if the enriched assemblies originated in the United States and no commercial outlet for reprocessing the fuel could be secured.

Gov. Dick Riley has been a leading advocate of getting South Carolina out of the business of storing much of

Continued

Senate panel favors bill spreading cleanup cost

Nuclear systems would aid Three Mile Island

Staff, wire reports

12B
WASHINGTON — The Senate Energy Committee approved a bill Wednesday requiring the nation's licensed nuclear utilities to share in the \$1 billion cleanup of Pennsylvania's Three Mile Island nuclear plant.

By a 12-7 vote, the committee approved legislation by Sen. John Heinz, R-Pa., that would require all licensed nuclear electric utility systems to provide a total of \$192 million over a six-year period for the cleanup operation.

"Free enterprise can't do it alone," argued Sen. J. Bennett Johnston, D-La.

The bill is supported by Duke Power Co., which operates the McGuire plant near Charlotte, N.C. and the Oconee plant near Seneca, S.C.

"There's not a real fair way to do it," Duke spokeswoman Mary Cartwright said of efforts to finance the cleanup.

"That utility does not have the assets to pay."

"If we (the nuclear industry) do show we can clean it up," the industry will be strengthened, she said, adding, "there's a whole group of lessons to be learned" from the TMI accident and cleanup.

Duke also supported a similar proposal made last year by the governor of Pennsylvania.

"We were asking our customers to pay pennies for an industry that has saved them dollars," she said.

Last year's proposal would have cost Duke's typical residential customer two cents extra per month, she said. The revised bill approved by the Senate Energy Committee probably would cost ratepayers more, but the amount had not been calculated, she said.

The six annual \$32 million payments would go into either the special "TMI-2 Cleanup Trust Fund" in the federal treasury or into the Pennsylvania Trust if Energy Secretary James Edwards finds that private trust fund is appropriate.

The committee adopted an amendment by Johnston that would exempt from the cleanup costs nuclear power plants which are under construction and which do not yet have operating licenses. They would be subject to the levy as soon as they receive licenses, however.

The worst commercial nuclear accident ever occurred March 28, 1979, in Unit No. 2 at the Three Mile Island plant near Harrisburg, Pa. The undamaged Unit No. 1 was also shut down following the accident.

A presidential commission concluded the accident was caused by human and mechanical failures. It said a cooling system valve became stuck, and control room operators did not manually turn on an emergency cooling system.

Heinz argued that cleaning up the damaged unit is a national problem and that legislation is needed to assure reasonable and equitable participation by all nuclear utilities.

But several senators called the bill a bad precedent that would backfire against the domestic nuclear industry, and vowed a tough fight against it on the Senate floor.

"It would be cheaper to make it into a national park," Sen. Paul Tsongas, D-Mass., said.

Sen. Gordon Humphrey, R-N.H., said, "When rate payers around the country find out they are being forced to participate in a bailout of a private industry, there is going to be an unfortunate reaction against the nuclear industry."

Humphrey said the nuclear utilities "are being corralled into this. It is not voluntary. Beyond that, it's the rate payers that are going to pay the bottom line."

"We should let GPU go under if necessary, and let others buy the thing at a discount that would let them clean it up," he said.