
Science & Technology

Congress to trade off nuclear programs?

by Marsha Freeman,
Science & Technology Editor

Could it be that the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, David Stockman, has used his own anti-nuclear prejudices to purposely put together a budget request that so devastates other energy research and development programs that nuclear energy has now become a target for cuts in order to restore other programs?

During the four years of the anti-nuclear Carter administration, the U.S. Congress voted funds to continue work on the Clinch River Breeder Reactor (CRBR) in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, to demonstrate its support for nuclear energy over the objections of the Energy Department. The liquid-metal fast-breeder-reactor program was seen as epitomizing the nation's long-term commitment to commercial nuclear power because, in addition to producing electric power, the breeder produces more fuel than it consumes and could provide an indefinite supply of nuclear fuel.

Now, for the first time in a decade, the administration in Washington has expressed its support for nuclear power development, but it has submitted a fiscal year 1983 budget request for the Department of Energy that has provoked an anti-nuclear backlash in the House and Senate.

Last year, for the first time in history, a combination of the free-market Republican and the anti-nuclear Democrat in the Science and Technology Committee succeeded in voting down funding for Clinch River. It was restored on the full House floor. This year it is unclear whether the added weight of the disgruntled coal-state representatives who have previously supported nuclear development will swing a majority of the House and Senate against nuclear energy.

An "unbalanced" DOE budget

The research and development budget submitted by

the administration for the Department of Energy for FY83 proposes to reduce funding from \$2.822 billion in FY82 to \$2.184. This does not take inflation into account. The bulk of the proposed reductions falls in the solar, conservation, environmental, and fossil-fuel programs.

Though there have been protests from the solar and soft technology lobby that their programs were cut by over 80 percent, most of those programs never had any reason to receive federal funds. The fossil fuel research, however, included high-technology programs such as magnetohydrodynamics and other coal, oil, and natural-gas research which is necessary to make the most efficient and economical use of these resources.

Senators and Congressmen have registered strong objection to the slashing of the fossil-fuel R&D budget from \$566 million in FY82 to the proposed level of \$107 million. Most of the FY82 funding was money put back into the fossil-fuel programs after the OMB tried to end them last year. Through the budget cycle Congress clearly expressed its judgment that these programs should continue. Now the DOE is trying to use these R&D dollars to *end* these programs by re-programming the authorized funds.

In hearings before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources on Feb. 23, Senators from coal-producing states such as Kentucky and Montana told DOE Secretary James Edwards that the only place left from which to take money for the devastated coal programs was the nuclear budget. Specifically targeted was the breeder.

Senator John Melcher (D-Mont.) stated that the "coal R&D programs, compared to nuclear, are out of proportion. The budget is warped toward nuclear," he continued, "and defies all common sense." Edwards lamely interjected that even the nuclear programs were cut in the FY83 budget, from \$1.089 billion last year to a proposed \$1.016 billion for FY83, but that did not allay the anger of the Senators.

Wendell Ford, a Democrat from Kentucky, warned: "Nuclear programs will die if the fossil programs die. Clinch River was funded last year because Congress also doubled the administration's request for fossil-fuel" programs, he stated.

Angered by Edwards's feeble defense that the government had to fund the nuclear R&D programs because the industry had been financially "burned" by the Carter administration, Ford replied that "it is a riot that we talk about needing government funding for nuclear when you're getting ready to 'burn' industry that works in the fossil-fuel programs, now." None of the coal-state Senators agreed with the administration that the private sector would pick up the R&D if it were dropped by the government, and in the case of magnetohydrodynamics (MHD) research, they insisted that it

should cohere with the administration's stated philosophy of funding "long-term, high-risk, and high pay-back" energy R&D.

"MHD was zeroed out of the budget," stated Senator Melcher, "even though it is the only ongoing R&D program to use coal for central-based electric power generation. It has already generated some electricity and is nearing the point of reaching its goals. It will increase the efficiency of producing electricity by using coal up to 50 percent, as opposed to conventional steam-turbine methods, which are only 34 percent efficient.

"MHD will be better at meeting federal standards for polluting emissions," Melcher continued, "and also for thermal pollution. It will be low-cost with high reliability and availability." MHD is a direct conversion process which burns coal at a high temperature and converts it directly to electricity without the use of steam turbines.

Melcher was supported by Rep. Albert Gore (D-Tenn.) a week later when the Energy Secretary appeared before the House Committee on Science and Technology on March 4.

"The OMB sees that MHD is moving along with great promise," he stated, "and is anticipating building a demonstration plant" if success continues. That is why [the OMB] zeroed it out—because they are not committed to a large-scale, possibly \$500 million demonstration of a needed technology. "The majority in Congress support this technology," Gore continued, "and you are turning the constitutional process upside down" by seeking to "reprogram the funds authorized by Congress to work on MHD" to terminate the program. "Why has the administration chosen to negate the Congress's action?" he asked rhetorically.

The danger in the current situation was summarized by Rep. Harold Volkmer (D-Mo.), who stated that he had "always supported the breeder and nuclear programs, but now I see an unfairness. I will have to vote with the other members to take money out of the breeder and nuclear for other programs."

'Free enterprise,' not Clinch River

Another kind of attack against the breeder and nuclear budgets came from freshmen Congressmen who have swallowed whole hog the administration's "free-enterprise" ideology. Rep. Vin Weber (R-Minn.) stated at the hearings that he was elected "to pursue the development of the economy based on the philosophy of a radically new role for the federal government," which does not include funding for demonstration projects like the breeder and synthetic fuels. Rep. Judd Gregg (R-N.H.) chimed in that the Clinch River breeder project had been "assessed by this committee last year as a failure, a white elephant, and non-economical."

Republican Rep. Claudine Schneider from Rhode Island, known for her anti-nuclear proclivities, told DOE representatives the following day that their budget "lacked total credibility" because of the conflict between their "free-market" rhetoric and support for Clinch River.

The pro-nuclear leadership of the House Science and Technology Committee has recognized the danger of this backlash. In her opening statement on March 4, Marilyn Bouquard, Chairman of the subcommittee on Energy Research and Production, which has jurisdiction over the nuclear and magnetic fusion programs, charged directly that the "administration's funding recommendations are generally unacceptable."

"We hear daily that the DOE is on the verge of precipitous action to break up critical R&D teams, a gesture which can only be interpreted as a direct contravention of the will and intent of both this committee and the existing law," she stated. After scoring the imbalance in the program funding, Mrs. Bouquard pointed out that the "nuclear programs in fission R&D and fusion have now become enormously vulnerable targets," even though the budget proposes "a 30 percent reduction in nuclear fission R&D and a significant reduction in real dollars for magnetic fusion."

"Can the administration seriously expect this committee to support these kinds of drastic measures all in the name of short-term economic recovery?" she demanded.

Mrs. Bouquard came to hearings on March 5 to discuss a report recently done by the DOE's Energy Research Advisory Board (ERAB), which recommended downgrading the Clinch River breeder to a "low-priority" project due to the lack of nuclear power plant construction.

Bouquard introduced into the hearing record a letter sent by Scientists and Engineers for Secure Energy, which is based in New York City, in reply to her request for a written response to the ERAB report. Their letter states that the ERAB recommendation on Clinch River "misrepresents the role of Liquid Metal Fast Breeder Reactors (LMFBR's), and in particular, CRBR. The Clinch River project is a necessary step in bringing the LMFBR program out of the paper-study and experimental phase and into the realm of practical use."

The project will "provide the United States with an option for an orderly transition, if such a transition is needed, to a virtually unlimited fuel supply for electric energy production," the letter continues.

Cong. Don Fuqua (D-Fla.), who chairs the full Science and Technology Committee, opened the hearings with the Secretary by stating that there is a "philosophical disagreement between the administration and the committee"; and there has been a "disregard of Congress's strong support for nuclear energy."