

Energy Insider by William Engdahl

Carter's policy again?

An important but too-little-noticed flank in the nuclear fight is the reprocessing issue.

On one level it is a paradox. The Reagan administration, including the President himself, is on record reversing the disastrous April 1977 Carter-Trilateral Commission policy attempt to halt advanced nuclear fuel cycle technology. It has lifted Carter's political freeze of domestic nuclear reprocessing and further indicated a more open "common sense" approach to the fact that nations such as France, Japan, and others have remained steadfast in commitment to advanced nuclear breeder and reprocessing development.

Yet the United States is further than ever from a serious commitment to breeder-reprocessing development. Even the pathetic \$10 million request from the administration in the FY83 budget for work on the sole remaining nuclear fuel reprocessing facility, the Allied-General Nuclear Services facility at Barnwell, South Carolina, is under budget attack.

Faint hope was aroused in some quarters by the fact that a new reorganization of the Energy Department's nuclear division adds a Deputy Assistant Secretary for Reprocessing. And many in the nuclear industry took favorable note of a March 24 public talk by Ashton O'Donnell of Bechtel National Inc., where he stated that their detailed evaluation of the potential for commercial reprocessing at the largely completed Barnwell facility showed no insurmountable obsta-

cles . . . other than political commitment.

In a previous column, I emphasized the importance of cutting the delays and getting on with the Clinch River fast breeder construction. But that money, as dear as the project is to the senior Senator from Tennessee, will be water down the drain without a simultaneous commitment to reprocessing.

What are termed "spent fuel rods" from conventional light water reactors actually contain some 96 percent reusable uranium and plutonium fuel which is not "waste," but rather valuable fuel for use in light water reactors and breeders. The plutonium needed to trigger Clinch River's breeder process is only available as a product of reprocessing.

So statements attributed to a very reliable industry source that as senior a Reagan nuclear official as former Bechtel official Ken Davis, now number two at DOE, supports the breeder but adamantly opposes reprocessing technology, leads us to suspect his overall commitment to nuclear development.

Officially, however, the Reagan administration remains locked into a "free enterprise" solution, a euphemism for killing the project. In this case, David Stockman and others, many of whom are pushing Stockman's pet project to dismantle DOE as a way of finally killing nuclear energy development, and piously arguing for "giving re-

processing to the private sector."

There is a bitter irony. I have had discussions with a number of people who have been involved with the effort to develop reprocessing for as long as 15 years in some cases. Before Carter made his April 1977 anti-reprocessing speech, industry had been eager to assume responsibility for commercial reprocessing.

An outgrowth of the original 1950s Atoms for Peace nuclear program, reprocessing and breeding would increase uranium fuel supplies by a prodigious amount, approximately 60-fold from present uranium availability. Further, of course, they overcome the so-called radioactive waste bugaboo, making only some 4 percent of high-level radioactive matter unusable. And that residue can be vitrified in proven technologies and buried deep in the core of the earth, or as some suggest, shot into outer space to join other radioactive matter.

France is presently capitalizing on a multibillion dollar international reprocessing market at its La Hague government facility. It is taking Japanese, Swedish, and other spent fuel and reprocessing it for about \$800 per kilogram, soon to reach a reported \$1,000 per kilogram. One industry source told me that Barnwell could do the same job for about \$425 per kilogram.

But this cannot be done before the administration breaks its Catch-22 reprocessing policy. A spokesman from Allied summed up the dilemma: "Private reprocessing equals a policy of no reprocessing," as long as the government refuses to take sufficient steps to guarantee against another Carter lunacy. Good intent is necessary but hardly sufficient.