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As I see it

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Quit making tritium, redirect spending

By Les AuCoin

Just last week, amid intense arguments about the reactor's safety, the Department of Energy restarted the Savannah River K reactor to produce tritium for nuclear weapons. On top of the safety concerns, DOE estimates it could cost hundreds of millions of dollars every month to put tritium production back on line.

The overriding fact is that, regardless of safety or cost, we simply don't need any more tritium. The demand for it is decreasing even faster than the supply.

Tritium is a man-made radioactive isotope of hydrogen, the "H" in the H-bomb, that dramatically boosts the explosive power of a nuclear warhead. According to the conventional wisdom, tritium decays so rapidly — at the rate of 5.5 percent per year — that the supply must continuously be replenished to keep pace with our weapons needs. Maybe this was true in the 1980s when nuclear forces were growing, and when arms reduction was blocked by the obsessive determination of both superpowers to keep far more nuclear weapons than national security required.



AuCoin

But in the past year the world has changed radically. We are no longer staring down an obstinate enemy; now we are seriously discussing foreign aid to help the other side dismantle its own weapons.

In this world, the "conventional wisdom" no longer applies. Our stock of both tactical and strategic nuclear weapons is shrinking at a rate that so far exceeds the decay rate of our tritium supply that it gives the lie to the Cold War logic.

President Bush has unilaterally withdrawn all of our land-launched and sea-launched tactical nuclear weapons. That's a two-thirds tactical reduction in a matter of weeks, so much faster than tritium's decay rate that it defies comparison.

Our air-launched nuclear forces are still in operation. But the same logic that led — wisely — to the conclusion that land-launched and sea-launched tactical nuclear weapons have no military value applies equally to air-launched weapons. The Pentagon may resist this logic for a while, but it won't be long before those weapons are retired too.

As far as long-range strategic weapons are concerned, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) reduces the stock of these weapons 5 percent annually for seven years — about the same rate as tritium decay. But START is almost certain to be augmented by addi-

tional deep reductions. Recent events suggest some strategic cuts may be made even without negotiation.

In sum, probable U.S. and Soviet nuclear forces will soon be only large enough to deter each other and to maintain supremacy over Third World countries. We could create such a force by retiring all of our tactical weapons, and perhaps three-fourths of our strategic weapons. Very roughly, this would reduce our weapons tritium requirement to one-eighth of its present level.

True, today the term "arms reduction" does not mean destroying warheads; it means cutting back on the weapons that deliver them. But there is no reason to keep nuclear warheads on hand if the means to deliver them no longer exist. There is even less reason to continue producing tritium for them.

Our present tritium reserve, bolstered by the material extracted from weapons retired under START, will meet all our tritium needs for at least two decades. Eventually we may need more tritium to maintain a residual nuclear force and for various civilian purposes. But this small amount can be produced by alternative technologies far more cheaply and safely than by a nuclear reactor built specifically for massive tritium production.

DOE plans to restart the K reactor for tritium production as an interim measure, and continues to hold out the possibility of building a new production

reactor. The interim measure alone will cost more than \$4 billion — before inflation and before the enormous overruns that are the industry standard.

Energy Secretary Watkins says his staff is "demoralized and weakened in talent" since they have been out of the tritium business. Four billion dollars will, no doubt, buy a lot of morale. But it would also buy a lot of child vaccines. Or pre-school education.

It would also buy a lot of cleanup. And to those of us who live downriver from the DOE's nuclear accident waiting to happen — the Hanford Nuclear Reservation — that's a far more pressing concern than giving DOE a \$4 billion pat on the back.

Congressman Mike Synar, D-Okla., and I have introduced the Nuclear Weapons Material Production Termination Act, which would prohibit further production of tritium for weapons until specifically authorized by Congress. By passing this bill, Congress will have the opportunity to recognize that we have better uses for the money — including cleaning up the horrific environmental damage caused by decades of nuclear weapons production.

U.S. Rep. Les AuCoin of Portland is a member of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee. He is a Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate.