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January 15, 1982

Dear Friend:

Knowing of your interest in nuclear issues, I am writing to keep you informed of the latest efforts in Congress to forge a national policy for nuclear waste disposal.

Nuclear waste is a problem intrinsically linked to other nuclear issues in this country. By plunging headlong into nuclear development without having looked ahead to the end of the fuel cycle, we now find ourselves grappling with an overload of dangerous radioactive wastes for which no one wants to accept responsibility.

The government's failure to come up with a place and a plan for disposal of high-level wastes has plagued the nuclear industry for twenty years and poses one of the chief obstacles to the industry's continued health.

Environmentalists worry in particular about the continued build-up of waste inventories at defense weapons plants, where highly radioactive sludge is stored in steel tanks and awaits permanent disposal. Since the beginning of the atomic weapons program, the government has ignored the problem. Even now, defense advocates insist that military wastes should not be included in any national waste policy considered this year.

Others argue that the obvious solution to the commercial waste problem is to move ahead with reprocessing, a chemical separation which salvages reusable uranium and plutonium from spent fuel rods. I strongly disagree. The plutonium produced by reprocessing poses a serious threat of nuclear proliferation. We already have discovered the inadequacy of our international safeguards in keeping track of dangerous nuclear materials which can be used to manufacture bombs. We have no guarantees that plutonium would not be diverted from reprocessing plants by terrorists or subversives intent on nuclear blackmail. It is a risk we cannot afford to take.

All of these concerns must be kept in mind when Congress begins deliberations this year on a national nuclear waste policy. Forces are at work in both the House and Senate to speed a waste bill through early in the session. I believe we must proceed cautiously to make certain we do not compound the damage already done by years of government negligence.

The House Interior Committee, of which I am a member, is scheduled to begin work in early February on a compromise waste bill, a substitute for H.R. 3809, as introduced by Committee Chairman Morris Udall (D-AZ). In many ways, it is a sound proposal.

Unlike other bills which have excluded wastes produced at defense weapons plants, the substitute bill includes permanent disposal of military wastes, which comprise about 90 percent of our waste problem.

The bill sets up a timetable for selection of a permanent waste repository where spent fuel and high-level wastes can be stored. And it provides that the nuclear industry--not the government--bear the expense for disposal of wastes created by commercial power plants and other facilities.

I believe the bill makes the best effort yet towards creating a safe and final solution for our waste dilemma. It shows more foresight than other plans, including one now under discussion in several Senate committees which establishes large away-from-reactor storage facilities (AFRs) where fuel could be placed temporarily until a permanent repository is opened. AFRs are nothing more than another temporary answer to a problem that has long warranted permanent resolution.

I have several concerns about the compromise bill, however. I oppose the section which sets up a 50-metric-ton monitored retrievable storage facility at a federal site, where spent fuel could be placed and later retrieved for reprocessing or burial. I believe this facility -- like the AFRs -- would be a waste of government time and money and could further impede our plan to find a permanent resting place for waste products.

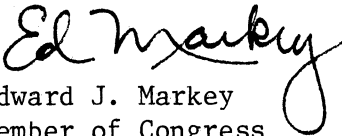
I believe the bill needs to forcefully address the reprocessing question and state unequivocally that the government will not try to resolve our waste problem by adding to the plutonium threat.

Finally, I intend to push for a stronger states' rights position in the bill. The compromise bill scrapped an amendment which I introduced last year allowing states to veto waste disposal sites unless both houses of Congress vote to override them. I believe my amendment gives the public the greatest possible voice in our nuclear waste disposal decisions.

Please feel free to share with me your thoughts on this issue as the nuclear waste bill moves through Congress. I welcome hearing your views on this or any other legislative issue.

With best wishes,

Sincerely,


Edward J. Markey
Member of Congress

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Comm. from Congressman Edward J. Markey Re:
Congressional efforts to develop a policy for
nuclear waste disposal.

In City Council,

February 1, 1982

2/1/1982

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