

Congressman Jeff Duncan's (SC-03) Statement for the Record

House Armed Services Committee Hearing on April 14, 2011

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about one of the priorities that this Committee faces in the coming year.

The Savannah River Site and National Lab is a unique asset to our nation. The National Lab is critical to developing new technologies which will lead to new ways to defend our nation. I was pleased recently to lead a tour of the site with my South Carolina colleagues.

My testimony today is intended to convey that the critical work being done at the Savannah River Site is treated the same as other defense related projects – by protecting what is vital even while we cut non-essential spending to reduce our overall budget deficit.

Perhaps the largest national policy impact of the Savannah River Site relates to nuclear non-proliferation. The work done at SRS directly impacts our treaties with Russia and our ability to match the work being done to dispose of surplus weapons grade plutonium. Disposing of excess fissile materials has been a major U.S. National security and nonproliferation objective since 1994, endorsed by every President and Congress since that time. Under the 2000 agreement, the United States and Russia have committed to dispose of 68 metric tons of surplus plutonium. These materials, if put on the open market, could wind up in the hands of our enemies, the terrorists who wish us harm. These are the materials that are being disposed of safely at Savannah River.

Disposing of surplus U.S. weapon-grade plutonium demonstrates that the United States is living up to its nonproliferation commitments by drawing down its nuclear arsenal in a transparent and irreversible manner.

I especially want to bring your attention to the work being done at H-Canyon. H-Canyon is the only facility of its kind in the United States, yet the Energy Department has proposed putting it in a “warm” or “standby” mode. Putting H-Canyon on standby or warm mode will inevitably cause severe negative impacts and would cost taxpayers more money in the future than it would save immediately. Repowering this type of facility after it has been out of commission for any period of time would require extended time frame and increased amounts of funding. Furthermore, the likelihood of ever restoring H-Canyon after achieving standby mode is, at best, slim. The loss of the human capital that is so crucial to the sites success would be incalculable.

The Savannah River Site is the only location in the country that has an operational large-scale facility capable of used nuclear fuel disposition. The site's capabilities include the processing of nuclear materials, plutonium and spent rod storage, tritium production and recycling, and nuclear forensics. The FBI forensics team also uses the national laboratory for homeland security purposes.

One last point I'd like to make: South Carolina has lived up to its commitment, and now it is time for the federal government to live up to theirs. Commitments were made by the federal government to ensure that even as SRS takes in new materials for processing, the site cannot be the final home of these materials. The important work at SRS transforms these relics of the Cold War into something that can be peacefully used in a 21st Century environment.

If H-Canyon is unable to process the aluminum clad spent fuel currently stored or scheduled to be sent to L-basin, there will be no disposition path within the complex, and all of this material would be stranded. It would be a betrayal of the federal government's commitments to lower the operating capabilities of the site while leaving the radioactive materials behind. I trust that this Committee will not allow that to happen.

The entire mission at the Savannah River Site is vital to our national defense, our economy, and our focus on energy independence.

Congressional support for the FY 12 Budget is critical to the overall success of the National Security Effort at SRS. The funding level currently provides the minimum resources needed to ensure the continued support of the nuclear stockpile by the site's Tritium Facility. Equally important, it also ensures the continuity of skills and knowledge necessary to maintain the United States' nuclear industrial capability.

I urge this Committee to protect the important work being done at Savannah River, and I thank you for your time.