

NRDC pushing new plutonium hoax

by William Jones

Following three days of front-page *New York Times* articles over the seizure of small quantities of plutonium smuggled into Germany, allegedly from Russian nuclear installations, the Natural Resources Defense Council held a press conference on Aug. 22 to "redefine" the rules regarding International Atomic Energy Agency inspections of nuclear facilities. The NRDC suddenly discovered that the criteria used by the IAEA to "sound the alarm" about the spread of nuclear materials grossly underestimates the dangers. In fact, says the NRDC, the IAEA errs in its calculations by a factor of eight!

The IAEA puts out an alarm when it discovers a diversion of a "significant quantity," or SQ in arms-control lingo, of nuclear material. An SQ is defined as "the approximate quantity of nuclear material in respect of which, taking into account any conversion process involved, the possibility of manufacturing a nuclear explosive device cannot be excluded"; that is, in ordinary language, the amount of nuclear material needed to produce a nuclear device. The IAEA defines the SQ value of direct-use nuclear material, i.e., plutonium-239 or uranium-233, as eight kilograms.

Wrong, says the NRDC. The real values, according to its calculations, are 1 kilogram of plutonium-239 or 1 kilogram of uranium-233. Not only are the values wrong, it claims, but the U.S. government also knows they are wrong and will not give the real figures, because using the real values would cost too much money.

These claims are in a report, "The Amount of Plutonium and Highly Enriched Uranium Needed for Pure Fission Nuclear Weapons," by NRDC researchers Thomas Cochran and Christopher Paine, distributed at the press conference. In a letter to Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary, the authors call on the Department of Energy to have the government petition the IAEA to reduce by eightfold their current SQ of direct-use nuclear materials.

A Ford Foundation spawn

But what is this NRDC, which is demanding changes in non-proliferation procedures?

The NRDC was set up in 1970 with a grant from the Ford Foundation, to create an institution of lawyers who are environmental activists. It cut its teeth lobbying for stricter regulations under the new Clean Air Act, and pioneered the tactic of targeting an industry, and suing it virtually out of existence. It has had significant policy influence. NRDC

founding member Gus Speth became the head of the Council on Environmental Quality when Jimmy Carter became President, and other staffers have taken posts in the Justice, Energy, and Interior departments.

NRDC lawyers have launched lawsuits against pesticide producers and users, the nuclear industry, towns and cities, industrial chemical users, and farmers, have popularized such hoaxes as nuclear winter, and created the alar scare. What are they targeting now?

According to Marilyn Meigs of British Nuclear Fuels Ltd., "They're really after the reprocessing facilities." In the reprocessing of nuclear wastes to get new fuel, a small amount of plutonium is produced. Reducing the "trigger threshold" for IAEA inspections would put many of these facilities under the gun of IAEA intrusions. This would particularly affect Japan, which has a major reprocessing capability, and is developing new technologies for the use of plutonium to produce energy.

Cochran was explicit on this issue, although without "naming names" of which countries would be affected. The new SQ criteria "would mean that we must put under safeguard facilities that are not now safeguarded," he said. In particular, he was concerned about Russian sites. "Guarding materials in Russia," said Cochran, is of the "highest priority."

Of course, further intrusions into the Russian nuclear program would not sit well with the Russian military, which is wary of international monitoring. The immediate State Department response to the NRDC report indicates that it also is not keen in changing the rules of the game at this stage. "Each country is responsible for providing physical protection of its fissile material," the department said in an Aug. 22 statement. It seems that even State understands that "national sovereignty" is still an issue that one tramples upon at one's peril.

Changing the rules of the game would also have important implications for the sensitive negotiations with the North Koreans. According to these new criteria, the NRDC is claiming that North Korea would have the capability of producing five nuclear weapons, rather than one or two, with the material (8-9 kg) they removed from nuclear reactors (assuming they have access to more sophisticated techniques than those used to produce a Nagasaki-type bomb).

But what is really at issue is not some "scientific" estimate of exactly how much is needed to make a nuclear device, but the political agenda of the NRDC. Cochran almost admitted as much. "During the Carter administration we attempted to take out of operation all plutonium programs," he said. "We were successful in doing this in the United States." With the collapse of U.S. nuclear capabilities under their belt, the NRDC was now interested in targeting the nuclear industries of other countries, including Russia. "In my opinion," Cochran said, "we should eliminate nuclear-weapons materials now." And this indeed is their intention, as a means of destroying nuclear energy production capabilities worldwide.