Post Register
Idaho Falls, ID
Circulation 29,400
January 10, 2011
Section A, Page 8

Something to celebrate

If the nation wants to usher in an age of clean nuclear energy, it needs to get serious about increasing the performance and operating lives of existing reactors.

If Idaho National Laboratory truly intends to live up to its designation as the nation's leading nuclear research center, that works needs to get done here.

And so we applaud Idaho's new agreement with the Department of Energy. This will expand the lab's ability to test commercial spent nuclear fuel in quantities allowed by the state's 1995 settlement with the feds.

The agreement, announced Thursday by Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter, is important for a variety of reasons:

■ It allows to lab to build relationships with the commercial nuclear industry. That could pay off down the road, nuclear blogger Dan Yurman wrote Friday. "The new testing activities on the back of the fuel cycle could establish the basis for new R&D activities related to nuclear fuel fabrication on the front end of the cycle. It could lead to new missions and new facilities for the lab. Lessons learned from fuel performance are valuable to utilities and to fuel fabrication vendors."

■ If INL doesn't do this work, somebody else will. The federal budget is going to shrink. National labs such as Los Alamos, Oak Ridge and Savannah River would love to poach some of INL's work.

The agreement pursued by Otter and Attorney General Lawrence Wasden paves the road for private and public investments in work, facilities and personnel at the lab.

■ The agreement allows INL to create a commercial spent fuel library. So, if a company has a problem with a particular reactor, INL may already have materials on hand to run tests. This would save time, money and effort.

It's important to point out a few things: The lab is already doing this work. The agreement simply allows INL to import a defined amount of fuel without seeking permission in every case.

Also, any fuel the lab imports will count against the cap of 55 metric tons allowed under the 1995 agreement. In reality, you're not talking about much material entering the state. As Yurman wrote Friday, Idaho can take only 400 kilograms of spent fuel per year. Under the 1995 agreement, everything needs to be out by 2035. That means the state could import about 25 fuel bundles over the next 24 years. One reactor can hold from 300 to 900 fuel bundles.

Finally, Thursday's announcement is a positive step in the often tense relationship between the lab and the state. That Otter signed a deal that helps the lab while respecting the 1995 agreement is something to celebrate and hopefully a sign of things to come.

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