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South Carolina lawmakers oppose H Canyon cuts

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Morris News Service
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COLUMBIA --- The prospect of phasing out a unique facility at the U.S. Department of Energy's Savannah River Site not only puts hundreds of jobs at risk but also might stick South Carolina with storing more spent nuclear fuel, a concern that site officials tried to address Thursday.

In a letter mailed Tuesday to U.S. Energy Secretary Steven Chu, the nine members of the Aiken County legislative delegation said that defunding the H Canyon facility at the site will leave the 15,000 used fuel rods stored at the site's L Area with no means of disposition. An additional 4,500 rods are expected to come through 2019.

"We are concerned that the state of South Carolina will become a permanent dumping ground for this used fuel," the state lawmakers wrote.

The 403,000-square-foot H Canyon facility is the only one in the nation to process certain types of plutonium, highly enriched uranium and aluminum-clad spent nuclear fuels.

The president's 2012 budget takes about \$100 million from H Canyon operations and moves it to liquid radioactive waste disposition activities.

Legislators have estimated job losses from the changes will be between 700 and 1,000. But a determination is not expected until the end of March.

On Thursday, Zack Smith, a deputy manager at SRS, told the Governor's Nuclear Advisory Council that efforts are being made to reduce risk and surveillance costs at the facility, but also offered a measure of assurance.

"We are looking to position the canyon so it is available for future missions for R&D efforts associated with processing used nuclear fuel," he said. "The department recognizes H Canyon as a key asset that will help address energy needs in the nation through research and development projects."

A final report on long-term waste disposal from the Obama administration's Blue Ribbon Commission is due next spring. Officials at all levels of government in the state have

protested the administration's decision to halt the decadelong effort to establish the Yucca Mountain permanent nuclear waste repository in Nevada.

On Thursday, Rep. Tom Young, R-Aiken, questioned the looming changes for H Canyon.

"Why put it in standby mode now?" Young said. "It looks like it's just going to make it easier for the (Blue Ribbon Commission) to come in and say, 'This is what we need to do,' if we're already doing it."

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