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## Editorial: Plutonium deal a step in the right direction

BY THE EDITORIAL STAFF

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The Department of Energy's best bet for getting rid of 9.5 metric tons of surplus weapons-grade plutonium stored at the Savannah River Site is grinding it up, mixing it with an inert substance, then burying it deep underground at the DOE's Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (shown above) in New Mexico.

Workers load nuclear waste containers into an underground crypt at the federal government's WIPP facility, a salt mine in New Mexico. Provided

In a sense, time is money. And when it comes to plutonium, timelines are long. So while the \$600 million the Department of Energy will pay to South Carolina to settle a lawsuit over the long-term storage of tons of the material is a lot of money, it's also long overdue.

The deal announced Monday covers “rent” for storing plutonium sent to the Savannah River Site in the early 2000s as part of a now-canceled project to convert it to nuclear fuel. But the money also buys the DOE more time — until at least 2037

— to figure out to how to permanently dispose of the manmade, radioactive metal.

The settlement, which covers about 9.5 metric tons, also comes as DOE is gearing up to start producing plutonium bomb cores, or pits, at SRS, and it's unclear if that could mean a net gain in plutonium between now and 2037. Gov. Henry McMaster and Attorney General Alan Wilson must get legally binding guarantees that won't happen in light of all the broken promises the federal government has made to South Carolina over the years. Under an earlier agreement, the DOE had less than two years left to remove the surplus plutonium at SRS.

Certainly, Mr. Wilson and his staff deserve high praise for pressing the legal case and negotiating the deal, which is the largest single settlement in state history. The sum, which will be paid almost immediately and comes out of fines collected by the DOE, will help the Palmetto State weather the economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. The money also should be used to help the region around SRS that has suffered job losses and other economic harm from the termination of the mixed oxide program.

Still, South Carolina must continue to press the federal government for more details, including a comprehensive strategy for removing the plutonium and meeting new deadlines. The national laboratory wasn't designed to store large amounts of nuclear materials, but over the years it has become the nation's second-biggest repository behind the national lab in Hanford, Washington.

The settlement hinges on trust, continuity within the DOE and future politicians holding to the terms of the agreement, which, with the blessings U.S. Attorney General Bill Barr and President Donald Trump, didn't need congressional approval.

The deal buys the DOE at least 15 years. If it meets plutonium removal goals by 2037, the DOE gets five more years. But if the DOE is unable to meet the goals by 2037, South Carolina could take further legal action and collect up to \$1.5 billion if none of the 9.5 tons of plutonium is removed by 2042.

At SRS, work to “downblend” weapons-grade plutonium into less volatile materials must continue. That way, the state has a better chance of disposing of the products at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant deep underground in New Mexico or at interim

storage sites outside South Carolina, such as the Pantex nuclear weapons plant in Texas.

Of course, the ultimate solution for all parties, including more than a dozen national labs, is for the federal government to establish a permanent national disposal site for high-level radioactive materials. Unfortunately, those efforts have been in limbo since 2011 when funding was cut off for the Yucca Mountain project in Nevada.

It is also disappointing that, unlike France and some other countries, the United States hasn't figured out a safe and economical way to reprocess spent fuel rods for a second life in reactors. If nuclear energy is to have a future here, that's something big utilities should work on.

Regardless of potential complications, the DOE settlement is a step forward. South Carolina gets a big lump sum, and the DOE gets more time. Importantly, the settlement will outlast the S.C. attorney general and the current administration in Washington, D.C. So South Carolinians and their elected officials must stay focused on the longer-term goal — removing all the surplus plutonium and high-level waste from SRS.

**TAGS**

- SAVANNAH RIVER SITE
- DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY
- SURPLUS PLUTONIUM
- LEGAL SETTLEMENT
- PLUTONIUM DOWNBLENDING
- DILUTE AND DISPOSE
- WASTE ISOLATION PILOT PLANT
- PANTEX WEAPONS PLANT
- MOX