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Congressman John Barrow Urges the Energy Department to Continue Funding for the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory

“The need to restore Department of Energy funding for the laboratory is urgent and immediate”

Washington, DC – In a letter to U.S. Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman, 12th District Georgia Congressman John Barrow (D-Savannah) today urged the Energy Department to restore funding for the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory (SREL), located on the Department of Energy's Savannah River Site (SRS). Federal funding for the lab is due to run out next month.

“Over the past 5 years, the Department’s support for the Lab has been dramatically reduced, while the University of Georgia, which manages the Laboratory, has continued to uphold its end of the financial bargain that has kept the SREL going over the years,” Barrow wrote. “I ask that your staff halt current plans to reduce funding and then develop a comprehensive plan for SREL to be fully supported by the Department in its historical and future mission.”

The SREL was created in 1951 to research the ecological effects of nuclear and atomic energy. Located on the SRS, and funded in part by the University of Georgia and the Atomic Energy Commission, SREL is directly involved in the cleanup missions and long-term stewardship of the SRS.

The full text of the Congressman Barrow’s letter to Energy Secretary Bodman:

Hon. Samuel W. Bodman
Secretary
U.S. Department of Energy
1000 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20585

Dear Secretary Bodman:

I am writing today because I am extremely concerned that a continuation of the Department’s course of reducing funding for the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory (SREL) is about to shut down the SREL completely. Over the past 5 years, the Department’s support for the Lab has been dramatically reduced, while the University of Georgia, which manages the Laboratory, has continued to uphold its end of the financial

bargain that has kept the SREL going over the years. Funding for the Laboratory is due to run out next month. As a result, the need to restore Department of Energy funding for the Laboratory is urgent and immediate.

The Savannah River Ecology Laboratory has been studying the effects of DOE's nuclear production and processing activities on the environment at Savannah River Site (SRS) for over fifty-five years. Currently, the Laboratory supports cleanup missions as well as providing critical information related to the long-term stewardship issues at the Department of Energy's Savannah River Site and the surrounding watershed.

I ask that your staff halt current plans to reduce funding and then develop a comprehensive plan for SREL to be fully supported by the Department in its historical and future mission. I then suggest that we work together so the Department can develop and project an expanded, adequate, and stable DOE budget that would support its vital mission, instead of the current plan to eliminate federal support.

The fact that SREL is an independent academic laboratory provides significant credibility among the general public and regulators on issues related to environmental impacts of nuclear facility operations, as well as the overall health of SRS ecosystems. Through its partnership with the DOE, the Savannah River Ecology Laboratory has established a strong international reputation for conducting high quality ecological research. From the beginning this contract has been merit-based and regular peer and programmatic reviews have continually confirmed the high quality of science as well as the excellent value that SREL brings to DOE. SREL is often cited as an institution whose expertise and research forms the basis of stakeholder support critical to the Department for conducting existing and future missions at the Savannah River Site.

Current plans are to leave significant quantities of radioactive and non-radioactive waste at the SRS, purportedly in a stable form. While I am not in the position to evaluate or comment on the potential long-term environmental issues surrounding these "stabilized" waste forms I am in a position to say that the SREL is an invaluable partner in helping us deal with these issues. A recent National Research Council report published by the National Academy of Sciences has raised doubts concerning proposed strategies over the hundreds to thousands of years required for the radioactive materials to decay. Because the SRS sits on top of a major aquifer and next to one of the most important major rivers in the southeast, it's my responsibility to ensure that my constituents, as well as others in the southeastern United States, are protected by DOE's waste disposition plans.

That's why it is critical to have an independent and credible source of information on how these plans will affect the environment. In addition to its ongoing research activities at the Savannah River Site, SREL is the organization that has the expertise, institutional memory, and academic credibility to develop and implement a long-term monitoring plan that will be accepted and trusted by the general public, regulators, and other stakeholders.

This issue is extremely time sensitive, and so I would appreciate your staff's immediate attention regarding this matter.

Sincerely,

John Barrow
Member of Congress

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