

Feds cancel research shipment of spent nuclear fuel to Idaho

October 23 2015, by Keith Ridler

Federal authorities have canceled the first of two proposed research shipments of spent nuclear fuel to eastern Idaho but still hope to deliver the second.

The U.S. Department of Energy said Friday that 25 fuel rods weighing about 100 pounds will not be sent to the Idaho National Laboratory.

The move comes after federal and state officials couldn't come to terms on a waiver to a 1995 agreement that ties such shipments to nuclear waste cleanup at the 890-square-mile site. The federal agency is currently in violation of the agreement because of its failure to convert 900,000 gallons of liquid waste into solid form due to malfunctions at a \$571 million plant.

"Unfortunately, we were unable to reach an understanding in time to accommodate the necessary transportation planning for the first proposed shipment," the agency said in an email to The Associated Press.

The agency declined to comment on what conditions it found unreasonable, and that it's assessing other potential destinations for the first research shipment.

"I'm disappointed that a shipment of spent [fuel rods](#) is being taken to a facility other than the Idaho National Laboratory," Idaho Attorney General Lawrence Wasden said in a statement. "But even more

disappointing is the Department of Energy's decision not to participate in direct and meaningful negotiations that could have led to a resolution that served the interests of all parties."

Wasden has said he'd sign a one-time, conditional waiver to allow the spent fuel into Idaho if federal officials could show him the Integrated Waste Treatment Unit was capable of processing the liquid waste.

The Department of Energy wants to better understand "high burnup" spent fuel that is accumulating at [nuclear power plants](#) in the U.S. High burnup fuel remains in nuclear reactor cores longer to produce more energy but comes out more radioactive and hotter. It's cooled in pools before being encased in steel and concrete.

The first proposed shipment to Idaho initially set for August would have come from the Byron Nuclear Power Station in Illinois.

The second shipment, also of 25 [spent nuclear fuel](#) rods weighing about 100 pounds, is scheduled for January 2016, from the North Anna Nuclear Power Station in Virginia.

The Department of Energy "will continue to work with the state of Idaho in an effort to identify a path forward for the proposed second shipment," the agency said.

The Idaho National Laboratory is one of 17 Department of Energy labs in the nation, and is considered the primary lab for nuclear research. Officials have said research work on the spent fuel would bring about \$20 million a year to Idaho, and losing the work could damage the lab's top-tier status.

"While I am disappointed in the loss of this work, I remain strongly optimistic about the national and international value of ongoing used

[nuclear fuel](#) research at INL and in the long-term future of the lab," Mark Peters, the lab's director, said in a letter to employees Friday afternoon.

Two former Idaho governors, Democrat Cecil Andrus and Republican Phil Batt, hammered out the 1995 agreement and blasted current Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter when it became known in January that the state was looking at creating a waiver to allow the [spent fuel](#) shipments.

"I'm pleased that they made that decision," said Andrus about the first shipment being canceled. "That's good news for the people of the state of Idaho."

The former governors have long warned that altering the 1995 agreement could open the gate to tons of commercial nuclear waste coming to Idaho for long-term storage. Andrus has filed a lawsuit against the Department of Energy seeking more information about the shipments.

The Idaho National Laboratory is in the district of Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, who in a statement called the decision not to send the first shipment "unfortunate" and that he'd continue to promote research opportunities at the lab.

"I'm sure it's frustrating for everybody involved," said Kerry Martin, an Idaho National Laboratory Oversight Program manager with the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality. "I know they've got good people working on (the liquid waste plant)."

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