

Idaho official: Feds issue deadline on nuclear fuel rods

By KEITH RIDLER, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — The U.S. Department of Energy has given Idaho a two-month deadline to waive parts of an agreement to clean up nuclear waste at a federal facility in southeast Idaho or lose doing important research work on spent nuclear fuel, an Idaho official says.

Idaho Department of Commerce Director Jeff Sayer in a letter to Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter dated Monday said the federal agency plans to send a 2016 shipment elsewhere if it's not allowed into the Idaho National Laboratory.

Sayer said the acting assistant secretary for the Office of Nuclear Energy, John Kotek, in mid-July told Idaho officials about the agency's plans. Sayer said that confirmed fears Idaho was in danger of losing the research work that would bring millions of dollars to the state.

"Mr. Kotek's comments removed ambiguity from this issue and clearly state that what was an earlier speculation is now a definitive reality," Sayer wrote.

The Office of Nuclear Energy didn't return a call from The Associated Press on Tuesday.

Sayer, besides directing the lead economic development agency in the state, is also a member of the Leadership in Nuclear Energy Commission, or LINE Commission. The commission was created by Otter through an executive order, and its purpose is to recommend to the governor policies and actions that support the Idaho National Laboratory and the economic benefits it offers to the state.

The Department of Energy wants to do research at the Idaho lab on "high burnup" spent fuel that's accumulating at nuclear power plants in the U.S. High burnup fuel remains in nuclear reactor cores longer to produce more energy, but it comes out more radioactive and hotter. It's cooled in pools before being encased in steel and concrete.

The Idaho National Laboratory would examine the spent fuel to determine how its properties change and what that means for storage at power plant sites and eventual removal for permanent storage. Scientists are also interested in recycling the fuel rods. Nuclear scientists at the Idaho facility say they can safely handle the spent fuel rods.

U.S. Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz in a letter to Otter dated Dec. 16 said funding for the research associated with the nuclear waste could bring up to \$20 million annually through the end of the decade.

However, the Department of Energy is in violation in two areas of a 1995 agreement hammered out with Idaho officials who were concerned the 890-square-mile federal site was being turned into a nuclear waste dump.

Malfunctions with a \$571 million facility called the Integrated Waste Treatment Unit continue to cause delays turning 900,000 gallons of liquid waste into a solid form. The high-level radioactive waste came from processing spent nuclear fuel from U.S. Navy ships and is stored in tanks.

The second violation is because an underground nuclear waste repository in southern New Mexico is not taking shipments of low-level waste because of mishaps at that facility, leaving the waste stuck in Idaho past deadlines set in the 1995 agreement.

Idaho Attorney General Lawrence Wasden has told federal officials that the state won't accept the spent fuel rods until the Department of Energy shows it can successfully process the liquid waste.

Sayer, in his letter to Otter, said Wasden was jeopardizing future research projects at the Idaho lab.

Wasden, in a statement to The Associated Press on Tuesday, said he understood the importance of the proposed shipment and the significance of the Idaho National Laboratory's role as a lead spent fuel research facility.

"I'm deeply disappointed that Mr. Sayer would write a letter on behalf of the Line Commission in which he outlines his understanding of my views without ever talking to me about my position and efforts," Wasden said. "I fully intend to have a conversation with Mr. Sayer."

Copyright 2015 The Associated Press