

Congressional Overseers Report Disturbing Findings to Secretary of Energy

In examining the U.S. government's troubled isotope supply program, the House Subcommittee on Environment, Energy, and Natural Resources says it has uncovered "disturbing" revelations and is calling for new mechanisms for funding and organization of the Energy Department's isotope program. The following is taken from an August 14, 1992 letter to Energy Secretary James D. Watkins from Rep. Mike Synar, chairman of the subcommittee. The letter was also signed by Rep. William F. Clinger, Jr. and Rep. John W. Cox, Jr.

The Subcommittee has learned a number of extremely disturbing facts concerning the heavy dependence of the U.S. on a single foreign isotope supplier. For example, testimony before the Subcommittee indicated that virtually all of certain essential medical isotopes used in the U.S. are provided by one Canadian supplier. As you know, last month that supplier was the subject of a labor dispute which could have had the effect of terminating thousands of critical medical procedures in the U.S. within a matter of days. No alternative source of supply exists to meet U.S. needs.

Testimony by representatives of a National Academy of Sciences panel examining the availability of isotopes in research indicated that research in the U.S. is being hampered by a lack of stable and radioactive isotopes at affordable prices.

Witnesses representing U.S. medical and industrial users also stated that our isotope supply was inadequate both in terms of availability and price.

We are further concerned over the Energy Department's inability to reach agreements with the research community to develop new isotope production capacity, such as the proposed National Biomedical Tracer Facility (NBTF), or with the radiopharmaceutical industry. Testimony before the Subcommittee indicated that the Department has been taking no action whatsoever on the NBTF proposal despite your recommendation to the Appropriations Committee in June 1991 that

a \$2 million project definition study be conducted.

Also of deep concern to us is the fact that the revolving fund established in 1989 to finance the program is entirely depleted and that the Department is borrowing millions of dollars from the Treasury to fund its isotope operations and the development of new isotope production capacity at Los Alamos. Although the Department has already embarked on the effort to create this new capacity, testimony before the Subcommittee indicated the Department may not have a market for isotopes from this new facility and has not formally established a policy on the extent to which it will attempt to compete with other domestic and foreign suppliers. Indeed, the Department's witness was not even aware that establishment of such a policy was recommended by the DOE's Inspector General in a February 1988 report.

Finally, we are seriously troubled by the low overall priority this program is receiving within DOE. Indeed, DOE's witness at our August 12 hearing confirmed that the isotope program was not a high priority for the Department despite its critical importance to an untold number of Americans, the research community and our industrial sector.

We believe that a full and immediate reexamination of the Department's isotope program and the role of the Federal government in providing isotopes is essential. We are aware of the fact that the Department has retained a consulting firm to conduct a study of the isotope program; such a study was endorsed by the General Accounting Office. Because of the seriousness of the isotope supply problem, we urge you to ensure that this program is fully reexamined in consultation with isotope users and appropriate Federal agencies. This review should examine new mechanisms for funding and organization of the Department's isotope program, including involvement of the private sector in joint public-private partnerships, and the future role of the Federal government in the supply of isotopes. ■

radiopharmaceuticals [companies] have a lot more clout for the products that they're interested in because of the dollar value associated with them," said chemist Richard L. Hahn, PhD, group leader of the chemistry department at Brookhaven National Laboratory in Upton, New York. He told the subcommittee that at least 225 stable isotopes are used in geochemistry, environmental science, nuclear physics, materials research, nutrition, and other fields. But with annual demand limited to fractions of a gram quantities, such uses could not

sustain operation of existing DOE separation facilities. Earlier this year, in fact, lack of funding forced the DOE to halt stable isotope enrichment and put the electromagnetic separators at Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee on standby.

Although Dr. Hahn acknowledged that projects like the NBTF are a beginning, he stressed the need for a comprehensive, long-term solution to the problems of all researchers. "We're depending on technology that was developed during the Manhattan project," he said. "Are

those facilities adequate today? Should they be modernized? Should they be replaced?" Dr. Hahn, who is chairman of the Committee on Nuclear and Radiochemistry of the National Research Council, said the NRC is prepared to conduct an in-depth study to suggest priorities and long-term direction for isotope production in the U.S.

The DOE's piecemeal attempts to assign priorities and designate which facilities to keep open and what isotopes to produce have disappointed just about

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