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RELEASE DATE: January 23, 2002

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Secretary Abraham Announces Administration Plan to Proceed with Plutonium Disposition & Reduce Proliferation Concerns

Says Plan Will "Enhance National Security & Advance Nonproliferation Goals"

WASHINGTON, D.C. - U.S. Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham announced today that the Department of Energy and the Bush Administration will dispose of 34 metric tons of surplus weapons grade plutonium by turning the material into mixed oxide fuel (MOX) for use in nuclear reactors. The decision follows an exhaustive Administration review of non-proliferation programs, including alternative technologies to dispose of surplus plutonium to meet the non-proliferation goals agreed to by the United States and Russia.

"Today's announcement is central to enhancing our national security and advancing our nonproliferation goals," Secretary Abraham said. "This path forward is a workable, technologically possible, and affordable solution, that meets our commitments to environmental improvement, energy and national security, and the nuclear nonproliferation policies agreed to by the United States and Russia."

In September 2000, the United States and Russia signed the Plutonium Management and Disposition Agreement committing each country to dispose of 34 metric tons of surplus plutonium.

The decision on plutonium disposition comes after a thorough reexamination of more than 40 disposition alternatives that

considered costs, workable technologies, national defense requirements, and compliance with nuclear non-proliferation agreements directed by the Department in cooperation with the National Security Council and the Department of State. The program has been under review since early last year.

Previously, the government endorsed a dual-track approach to dispose of the plutonium including turning some of the material into MOX reactor fuel and immobilizing the remaining plutonium in self-protecting radioactive glass logs for long-term storage. Eliminating immobilization from the disposition pathway saves nearly \$2 billion in funding, decreases plutonium storage costs, and facilitates the closure of the Department's former Nuclear Weapons Complex sites.

"There is an increased urgency to move forward with the elimination of surplus weapons grade material like plutonium," Abraham said. "Focusing on proven technologies to eliminate this material, reducing costs in the process, and keeping our commitment to national security and the clean-up of former weapons sites is the right path to follow," Abraham said, noting that European countries have used MOX fuel in their reactors for over 20 years.

The MOX conversion process is expected to cost \$3.8 billion over 20 years, including the construction of two new conversion facilities at the Department of Energy's Savannah River Site in South Carolina, including disassembly and fuel fabrication facilities. Construction of the facilities, set to begin in Fiscal Year 2004, will create on average 500 new jobs and operation of the facilities will result in approximately 800 new jobs.

The Department of State and the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration will work with their counterparts in Russia to achieve the disposition of Russian surplus plutonium through the MOX process. Bilateral cooperation and inspections will ensure progress.

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Release No. PR-02-007

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