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CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
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Key points from  
Oregon Congressman Les AuCoin's  
Address to the League of Women Voters  
on the Northwest Regional Power Bill  
Lloyd Center Sheraton  
Portland, Oregon

Nuclear power amendment: Today I am announcing the minimum requirements that must be met in order for the Northwest Regional Power Bill to have my support. If these terms are not met, I cannot support this legislation.

The terms are simply this: Passage of an amendment I will offer to allow the use of the BPA Administrator's purchase authority for new nuclear plants only after:

- The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has licensed the operation of a permanent storage facility or facilities for high-level nuclear waste and spent fuel, and
- The NRC has determined that state and local evacuation plans are in effect for each nuclear power plant.

Why amendment is needed: The chief problem with the bill is that it is silent on nuclear power — an issue which sharply divides the people of the region and threatens passage of the bill. It is irresponsible for the bill not to address such an important issue and include a solution that all parties can live with.

- The bill speaks to the need for conservation as a resource and should address the reverse side of that resource: The conditions under which new thermal, i.e., nuclear, plants are built in the region.
- The bill sets out procedures for mapping the energy future of the region. It may not be able to tell us if nuclear power will be a part of that future; but it should tell us how it will factor in as a part of the solution.

Moreover, such an amendment is important not just because public opinion is sharply divided on the issue of nuclear power. Not just because the problem of nuclear waste must be solved. And not just because it is foolish to operate an atomic plant without an emergency evacuation plan in place. It is also important so that people in the region know where we are going with our energy future.

This amendment reflects the realities we face on the future of nuclear power.

- The President has already proposed a program to develop and license a Federal disposal facility and have it on-line by the mid-1990's. This would coincide with the completion of a new nuclear facility that were begun today (assuming the usual 12 years to build).
- Such a provision would harness the full support of the region for a permanent depository for nuclear waste.
- A report on disposal of spent fuel and Three Mile Island by the Oregon Department of Energy concludes that repositories for spent fuel disposal will be available and adequate to protect people from injury.

Purchase authority and nuclear power: Ever since this version of the Northwest regional power bill was introduced a year ago, the debate has revolved around the issue of nuclear power. How will the legislation affect existing nuclear plants in the region and, what does it mean for the building of new atomic plants? Supporters of the bill have tried to de-emphasize this issue and maintain that the regional power bill is not "pro-nuke".

In spite of the rhetoric of utility officials, we should be aware that the bill does provide incentives for building large central, thermal plants, including nuclear facilities.

● Purchase authority - According to Sterling Munro, this is the "heart" of the bill. It allows the Bonneville Power Administration to purchase the output capability of new power plants that are built by the region's utilities. This, effectively, will spread the risk of such expensive ventures over the entire region and its ratepayers. There is nothing inherently immoral in this as some would allege. Spreading the risk is compatible with the nature of our regional power system, which should spread the benefits of hydroelectric power. But we should know that it will facilitate the financing of nuclear plants, and therefore nuclear safeguard language becomes essential.

● The Administrator can acquire a major resource not included in the plan simply by having Congress appropriate the funds. It does not require a separate authorization of Congress. As I indicated in my testimony last summer, the appropriation process is almost no check at all on the Administrator's preemptive powers and it has the potential to render the regional power plan — the planning council — meaningless. Those familiar with the workings of Congress know that an appropriations bill on the floor of the House is like an iron fortress and practically impossible to amend.

Benefits of NW Power Bill: I am announcing my position publicly after privately circulating my proposal among those interests who advocate passage of the legislation. Even though most agree that it is an entirely reasonable position and that the circumstances I have just outlined favor adoption of such an amendment, there have been no "takers." If that remains the case, they need to know that I will oppose the bill.

In proposing this amendment, let me assure you that I am cognizant of the many benefits that the legislation holds out to the region. I believe it takes important steps toward the kind of energy future which is in keeping with the special quality of the Northwest and our ability to innovate and pioneer better ways of doing things.

- It creates a regional council to plan for meeting the region's energy needs and thereby maximize the mainstay of Northwest power: the hydro-electric system.
- It encourages conservation on an unprecedented scale through model conservation standards, funding for conservation efforts, allowing for retail conservation rates and by giving it a margin of benefit in figuring the cost-effectiveness of additional resources.
- It provides a way to rectify some of the problems of declining fish runs on the Columbia, problems caused by power generation.
- This amendment will not by itself foreclose the building of new nuclear plants. Under the bill, that is still a decision for the planning council and for each state to make. What it will do is make it clear that before a decision is made, we will have one of the most vexing and onerous problems of nuclear power solved: waste disposal. We owe this to ourselves and we owe to our children.