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ONE HUNDRED TENTH CONGRESS

**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Energy and Commerce**  
**Washington, DC 20515-6115**

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August 8, 2008

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AND CHIEF COUNSEL

The Honorable Gene Dodaro  
Acting Comptroller General  
U.S. Government Accountability Office  
441 G Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

Highly enriched uranium (HEU) is widely regarded as the most likely material to be pursued by terrorists interested in constructing a crude nuclear weapon. While the United States is rightly concerned with efforts by countries such as Iran to acquire the enrichment capabilities to produce HEU, there are already hundreds of research reactors and other facilities around the world fueled with this weapons-usable material. Therefore, it is an abiding national security interest to ensure that, as rapidly as possible, these stockpiles of HEU—much of which was provided by the United States and Russia in preceding decades—are removed from vulnerable facilities, consolidated into a smaller number of more secure locations, and ultimately down-blended or converted to lower enrichment levels unsuitable for weapons.

The National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) oversees several programs designed to achieve these goals. For instance, under the NNSA International Nuclear Materials Protection and Cooperation Program, a Material Consolidation and Conversion (MCC) effort has been underway since the late 1990s to consolidate Russian HEU into fewer, more secure locations and convert this material to low-enriched uranium (LEU). This effort is currently funded at approximately \$20 million per year. In addition, in 2004, the Secretary of Energy announced the creation of NNSA's Global Threat Reduction Initiative (GTRI) to integrate management and coordination of several Department of Energy programs focused on so-called "global cleanout" of highly enriched uranium. Today, the GTRI program consists of efforts to convert research reactors to LEU, "take back" efforts to return highly enriched uranium of U.S. and Russian origin from foreign facilities to secure storage locations in each country, and to address so-called "gap" materials that are not being addressed by the aforementioned "take back" efforts. For the coming year, GTRI has budgeted approximately \$80 million for HEU conversion and removal efforts.

Both the MCC and the GTRI efforts to convert and consolidate global HEU stocks, however, are at a critical juncture, and it is unclear to the Committee whether the scope and pace of these programs are consistent with the overall threat. At the current pace, it may take more than a decade before many of the programs' objectives are met. Furthermore, it is not clear to the Committee that these programs have developed comprehensive strategies and action plans for addressing all stockpiles of HEU in various locations around the world.

For instance, while the MCC program appears to have made progress in down-blending Russian highly enriched uranium to lower levels, it is unclear to what extent the program has been successful in consolidating the vast Russian HEU stockpiles into a smaller number of locations. The GTRI program has plans to convert a large number of HEU-fueled research reactors to low-enriched uranium, but it may not address scores of other reactors and facilities—such as critical assemblies or icebreaker reactors—that utilize highly enriched uranium, and it does not have plans to assist in shutting down HEU-fueled reactors that are very difficult to convert for technical reasons. Finally, it is unclear whether GTRI will recover and return the majority of U.S.-supplied highly enriched uranium located at foreign facilities.

For these reasons, we request that the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) review the progress, strategies, implementation, and management of NNSA programs focused on the worldwide recovery, consolidation, and conversion of highly enriched uranium stockpiles and facilities. Specifically, we request that GAO examine the following issues:

1. What is the status of the NNSA's HEU recovery, conversion, and consolidation programs, including their objectives, timetables, and projected future funding requirements?
2. What is the scope of the work plans that have been developed for each program, and have the programs excluded certain HEU stockpiles or facilities using highly enriched uranium for conversion, cleanout, or consolidation? If so, which facilities and stockpiles have been excluded and why?
3. How have the programs prioritized and ordered HEU facilities and stockpiles around the world for recovery, cleanout, or consolidation actions?
4. What obstacles, including those related to more extensive consolidation and conversion of Russian HEU stockpiles and facilities, are currently facing these programs? How has NNSA attempted to overcome these challenges?
5. How well are these programs integrated, and to what extent are they coordinated with programs of other foreign governments and with international organizations?

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6. What are the prospects for continued U.S. purchase of excess Russian HEU following the conclusion of the current U.S.-Russian purchase agreement in 2013? What are the barriers to extending the agreement or reaching a new, similar agreement?

If you have questions regarding this request, please contact Mr. John F. Sopko of the Committee staff at (202) 226-2424. Thank you for your time and prompt attention to our request.

Sincerely,



John D. Dingell  
Chairman



Bart Stupak  
Chairman  
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations

cc: The Honorable Joe Barton, Ranking Member  
Committee on Energy and Commerce

The Honorable John Shimkus, Ranking Member  
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations