

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

April 24, 1998

The Honorable Joseph M. McDade
Chairman, Subcommittee on Energy and
Water Development
House Committee on Appropriations
2362 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

We are writing to express our full support for the vital public and worker health and safety oversight work of the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board.

The Board is the only independent technical organization external to the Department of Energy (DOE) with oversight responsibility for nuclear safety at DOE's defense nuclear facilities. As an external "action-forcing" agency, the Board influences DOE line management actions to achieve safety objectives. Since 1992, the Board has sent almost 100 written communications to DOE regarding issues and observations that affect the safety of weapons activities and facilities. These upgrades stimulated by Board action are being accomplished throughout the nuclear weapons complex. We believe the Board's actions reduce the possibility of accidents that would adversely affect DOE's ability to continue its weapons missions.

The Board's statutory mission to ensure that worker and public health and safety is adequately protected at DOE's defense nuclear facilities has and will continue to be important in maintaining DOE's attention to safety. We have found the Board to be a constructive partner in its oversight role, whether the mission is accelerated closure of a DOE site or the continued safe operation of the Nation's nuclear weapons stockpile and components program.

While there have been suggestions that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) should take over the Board's role, we believe there are many practical and policy considerations that would have to be considered in such a transition of responsibility. At a minimum, Congress must carefully scrutinize any such proposal before approving such a transition, and due to the crowded legislative schedule for this year, we believe that no transfer of responsibility from the Board to the NRC should be contemplated this year.

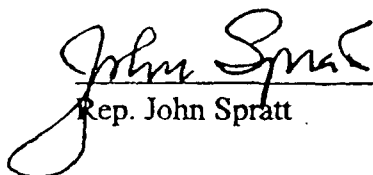
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Now is also not the time to withdraw resources from the Board. The rapid change in DOE's mission during the past few years, coupled with the loss of expertise from the defense nuclear complex as a result of retirements, layoffs, and other downsizing activities, requires that we have an agency whose technical judgment on nuclear safety matters is reliably accurate and forthright. Many of the safety issues arising from these extraordinary mission changes involve operations and processes that are new to DOE and its contractors. Experience throughout the DOE nuclear weapons complex confirms that shutting down a defense nuclear facility can actually increase the risk of dispersal of radioactivity above that encountered during routine operations as a result of material degradation, natural phenomena hazards, fires, or accidental nuclear criticality. This dynamic situation demands that the Board exercise significant flexibility and maintain the technical expertise needed to deal with the myriad of unique safety issues that arise as DOE upgrades the safety of the defense nuclear complex, reduces its overall size, and modernizes its capabilities.

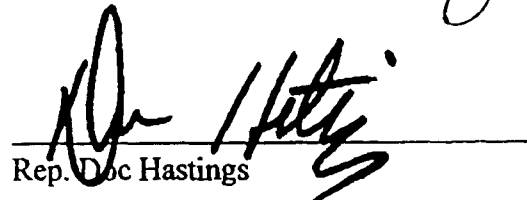
In summary, Congress originally established the Board to not only identify health and safety problem areas but to aid in their solution through specific recommendations. The technical expertise of the Board continues to be needed to provide added assurance to the Congress and the public that DOE is implementing a sound program for the safe management of the production and use of defense nuclear materials, a program that provides reasonable assurance of no undue risk to the workers and the public, and protects the environment. Therefore, we urge the Subcommittee to fully support the Board's FY 1999 budget request for \$17.5 million.

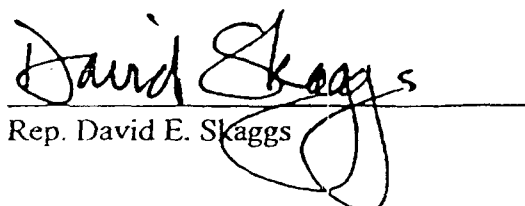
Respectfully,

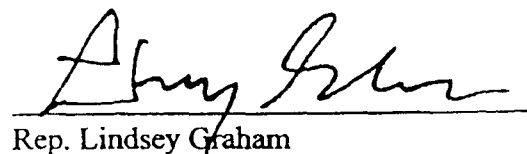

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Rep. Mac Thornberry


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Rep. David E. Skaggs


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