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Congressmen call for investigation of DOE's support for Centrifuge

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The Gazette staff

PIKETON -- Two congressmen are calling for an investigation into the Department of Energy's financial support for USEC's American Centrifuge Plant in Piketon.

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U.S. Rep. Ed Markey, D-Mass., and U.S. Rep. Michael Burgess, R-Texas, sent a letter Tuesday to Gene Dodaro, comptroller general with the U.S. Government Accountability Office, outlining several concerns with the DOE's actions while USEC has been pursuing a \$2 billion loan guarantee for the project. Markey is a ranking member of the House Natural Resources Committee, while Burgess is a member of the Energy and Commerce Committee.

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Some of the concerns mirror those Markey outlined in a January letter to Energy Secretary Steven Chu, including his belief the USEC technology never will be capable of successful commercial operation and his worries about the company's CCC-plus credit rating and financial situation.

In the letter to the GAO, however, Markey and Burgess go further, questioning whether some of the support offered comes in violation of the congressional act that privatized USEC during the late 1990s.

"We believe that this support is unlikely to result in the successful commercialization of USEC's domestic uranium enrichment technology, may have been and may continue to be undertaken in contravention of various laws and is additionally unjustifiable using assertions of this project's importance to national security," the pair wrote.

The DOE has remained reluctant to approve a \$2 billion loan guarantee for the project since rejecting the original application from USEC in 2009. It has, however, made other moves in terms of helping with research, development and demonstration funding and assuming liability for \$44 million in uranium tails -- a byproduct of the enrichment process -- to help the company free up money to

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continue to develop the centrifuge technology. The DOE is negotiating with USEC to assume about \$80 million in company assets in exchange for taking title of the centrifuges at the Piketon plant to help the company continue funding research and development a bit longer. USEC is attempting to bridge a gap between a Friday deadline from its creditors to secure federal funding for the remainder of this fiscal year and expected funding in the 2013 federal budget, which would become available in October.

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In the letter, the congressmen dispute claims made by the DOE that the centrifuge project fills a national security need by being a key source of tritium required for the U.S. nuclear weapons program. Markey indicated he has requested reports from the Congressional Research Service to dispute the claim.

They also contend a recent uranium transfer announcement that helped keep USEC's Paducah, Ky., plant open for another year might have been done in violation of the USEC Privatization Act and that other DOE actions with regard to USEC might be out of compliance with other statutes, such as the National Environmental Police Act and National Historic Preservation Act.

USEC received a show of support this past week when the House approved \$100 million in research and development funds for the 2013 fiscal year -- a figure the company hopes will jump to \$150 million when the House and Senate reconcile their proposals. A DOE spokeswoman also indicated this past week that "significant progress" is being made in the funding negotiations.

A representative from USEC indicated Tuesday the company does not want to directly address the congressmen's letter but did refer the Gazette to material posted on the company's website attacking Markey's frequent claims that USEC has received massive bailouts from the government.

In the material, USEC indicates that its privatization in 1998 provided nearly \$3.1 billion in benefits to taxpayers, and the company has paid more than \$300 million annually in federal and state taxes ever since. The material also defends the argument the Centrifuge is needed for national security purposes and points out the company's shareholders have invested more than \$2 billion to resurrect and improve on technology that will "preserve U.S. standing, jobs and competitiveness in the global nuclear fuel market."

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