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December 18, 1998

Honorable Bill Richardson  
Secretary of Energy  
Forrestal Building  
1000 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20585

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Dear Secretary Richardson:

I write to express my deep concern over the department's "Proposed Plan for Waste Area Group 3 at the Idaho Chemical Processing Plant" at the Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory ("INEEL"), and to request your personal attention in redirecting critical aspects of this effort. Additionally, I ask that the public comment period be extended for thirty days.

Among other things, the Proposed Plan calls for construction of a new radioactive waste disposal facility overlying the Snake River Plain aquifer. Dubbed the "INEEL CERCLA Disposal Facility," it is projected to bury more than half a million cubic yards of radioactive waste from hundreds of dispersed, contaminated locations. The dump is to be constructed near unlined radioactive liquid percolation ponds, which have already caused extensive contamination at the proposed location.

The Snake River Plain aquifer is one of Idaho's crown jewels. This hugely productive "sole source" drinking water supply is also essential to the future of Idaho's agricultural economy. Experience has proven that the porous sand and gravel soils and fractured basalt geology overlying this world class water resource are insufficient protection against migrating chemical and radioactive contamination. Relying on man-made materials of potential unproven longevity to make up for unsuitable site conditions, as the Plan recommends, invites future environmental and economic problems.

I ask the Department to work with the Environment Protection Agency and the State of Idaho to revise the Proposed Plan by steering away from the development of radioactive waste disposal facilities over the Snake River Plain aquifer. The Plan and all future INEEL clean-up actions should reflect off-aquifer disposal as the preferred alternative for final disposition of contaminated materials excavated at the site.

Secretary Richardson  
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I further recommend that the Department adopt a site-wide policy that active radioactive disposal facilities overlying the Snake River Plain aquifer be permanently closed during the initial 5 year period covered by the Department's upcoming INEEL Management and Operation contract. This policy direction should be prominently featured in the final Request for Proposals issued by the department.

Mr. Secretary, our own government must not plant the seeds of future problems in the process of correcting its own past mistakes. This is particularly critical where, as here, the environmental concern involves a natural resource as precious as the Snake River Plain aquifer. I understand that securing permanent off-aquifer disposal solutions may involve added costs and interim waste handling not currently envisioned. I hope that you will agree that for sake of the future, we must take the long view.

By copy, I request that my comments be placed on the record with other input received during the public comment period on the proposed plan, currently slated to close on December 22, 1998. Given the busy holiday season now upon us and the huge importance of these issues, I further request that the public comment period be formally extended by thirty days and the public so notified.

I look forward to your timely and positive response to my requests, and pledge my cooperation in implementing environmentally sound decisions which insure adequate protections of Idaho's irreplaceable natural heritage.

Sincerely,



Helen Chenoweth  
Member of Congress