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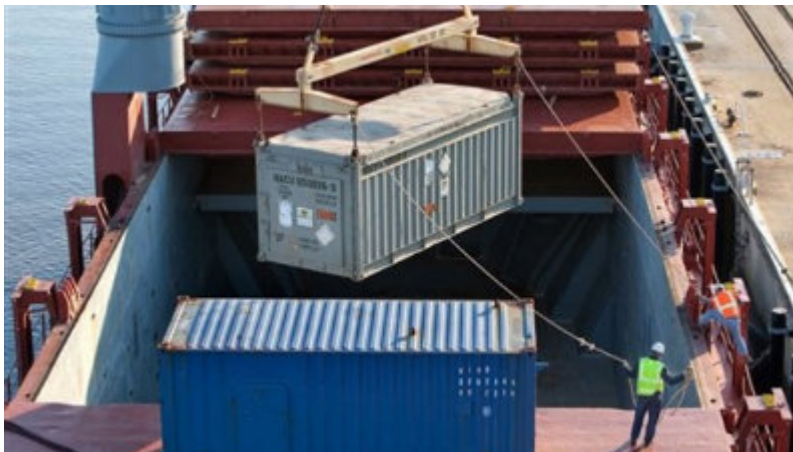
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U.S. a Popular Destination for the World's Unwanted Nuclear Supply

By Judson Berger

- FOXNews.com

The United States rapidly is becoming the hottest destination for unwanted nuclear fuel, as the Obama administration steps up efforts to relieve other countries of their weapons-grade nuclear supplies.



A massive crane lifts a container of highly enriched uranium from Chile bound for the Savannah River Site on a ship March 19. (AP Photo)

Give me your tired, your poor, your fissile material yearning to be downgraded.

The United States rapidly is becoming the hottest destination for unwanted nuclear fuel, as the Obama administration steps up efforts to relieve other countries of their weapons-grade nuclear supplies.

President Obama is pressing other nations to give up the material in an effort to keep it as far away from terror groups as possible. That's the No. 1 goal of this week's nuclear security summit in Washington.

More often than not, any country that agrees to give up years' worth of enriched uranium is sending the radioactive material to the United States. The nuclear material is typically kept at one of two facilities: the Savannah River Site near Aiken, S.C., or the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge, Tenn.

This raises concerns about cost, since the U.S. devotes millions of dollars to converting the material. And it could raise questions about security, too.

U.S. officials insist the supply is safer in the United States than anywhere else in the world, and they say the U.S. is best-equipped to handle it.

"We certainly have the most secure facilities in the world and we have the technological ability to actually do the removals," said a National Nuclear Security Administration official.

Three more countries announced transfer agreements at the D.C. summit -- Canada and Mexico both agreed to ship back highly enriched uranium that was originally from the United States, and Ukraine agreed to purge its weapons-grade nuclear supply by 2012.

White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs said Monday that it's not been determined where Ukraine's material will go, but he made the case for the United States to house it.

"I think the American people feel wholly more confident that the material of which not a huge amount can destroy an entire city ... that that material is under safe lock and key and guard in this country, rather than potentially floating around somewhere else," Gibbs said.

If Ukraine sends its nuclear material here, it will continue a new phase in the United States' role in storing the world's nuclear supply.

For years, the United States has taken back from other countries highly enriched uranium that originated in the U.S. According to the National Nuclear Security Administration, well over one ton of the stuff has been returned from more than 30 countries.

But early last year, the NNSA allowed taking nuclear fuel that did not originate in the United States. The first country to fall under this new policy was Chile, which just finished shipping its highly enriched uranium to America ahead of the D.C. summit. That material originated in France and Great Britain, not the United States.

"That's the first of its kind," the NNSA official said.

The trend will continue if the United States takes Ukraine's nuclear material, which originated in Russia.

Under typical agreements with other countries, the United States takes their highly enriched uranium in exchange for low-enriched uranium that can be used for peaceful purposes.

The United States then takes the highly enriched uranium and downgrades it for future use, storing it at the sites in Tennessee and South Carolina, which the NNSA official said are "highly guarded."

Justin Logan, a foreign policy analyst with the Cato Institute, agreed that the United States has the capacity and the secure facilities to store the material.

But he said the U.S. has become somewhat of a victim of the urgency it has placed on the problem, assuming the bulk of the costs associated with converting the material.

"The default position is, if this is the high priority for you, you get to bear a large chunk of the costs," Logan said. "I certainly think it would be better if the costs were defrayed more equitably."

Obama has requested \$559 million, or a 68 percent increase, for next year's budget for the Global Threat Reduction Initiative -- the NNSA arm tasked with handling the high-risk nuclear material around the world.

Logan said the risk of nuclear terrorism is not as high as some make it out to be. But he said even a "marginal decrease" in risk may be worth the price of sending the material to the United States for storage and processing.

So far, the NNSA has completely "cleaned out" weapons-grade nuclear material from 18 countries, including Chile.