

OPINION

Mike Levin: Nuclear fuel removal has come a long way, but there's still work to do



Dry storage of used fuel rods at the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station in Camp Pendleton, CA, on Thursday, December 16, 2021. (Photo by Jeff Gritchen, Orange County Register/SCNG)



By **MIKE LEVIN** | Orange County Register

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Residents of Southern California and drivers on the 5 are very familiar with the sight of the two domes that distinguish the now-decommissioning San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station (SONGS). The plant has been a permanent fixture along the coast for several decades.

While no longer active, the plant's roughly 3.55 million pounds of spent nuclear fuel pose potential environmental and health threats, especially given SONGS' location near an active fault and on the beach as sea levels rise. Further, SONGS' location on Camp Pendleton poses real national security threats. These factors are why it is imperative that we find solutions to safely remove the spent nuclear fuel.

Since taking office in 2019, I have made it a top priority to find a bipartisan path to address our nation's spent nuclear fuel located at SONGS and the roughly 80 other sites in 34 states across the country. That's because the situation at SONGS is a symptom of the government's previous inaction on all spent nuclear fuel. With colleagues on both sides of the aisle, I am working to safely manage and remove the waste. I'm proud of the progress we've made so far, especially since this issue had been at a standstill for years before I entered Congress.

During my first term in office, I launched the SONGS Task Force that brought together local leaders to craft recommendations to address nuclear waste. These recommendations have informed my work in Congress. One recommendation was that I convene Democrats and Republicans to pursue pragmatic solutions for our nation's spent nuclear fuel. As founder of the bipartisan Spent Nuclear Fuel Solutions Caucus, I've done just that, and our group serves as a forum through which we can work together on these solutions.

Other recommendations have been introduced as formal legislation in Congress, and have even become law, including funding I secured to restart the Department of Energy's consent-based siting process for consolidated interim storage (CIS) of spent nuclear fuel. A CIS facility would be a place where we can safely move the waste from SONGS while the federal government continues its work on a repository that will serve as the ultimate disposal site for that waste.

With over \$140 million in funding to restart this program, I've been working to ensure the success of the consent-based siting process for CIS. This siting process relies upon community engagement and state consent, which are critical to successfully finding a new place for the waste. The federal government is currently working with communities across the nation to find informed and consent-based solutions to store and dispose of spent nuclear fuel.

I have also partnered with Rep. Darrell Issa, R-California, to reintroduce the bipartisan Spent Fuel Prioritization Act to prioritize the removal of spent nuclear fuel from decommissioned nuclear sites with high environmental, seismic, and national security concerns. This is dependent on having a storage site to take the fuel, but our bill would place SONGS at the top of the list for such a site. I first introduced this bill in 2019 and I am working to garner further Congressional support and move the bill through the legislative process.

Alongside this work on long-term solutions and to find a storage site, I also want to ensure that the current situation at SONGS is safe and that we implement lessons we have learned during the facility's decommissioning process. Accordingly, I introduced the 100-Year Canister Act to raise the design standards for nuclear waste storage canisters to ensure they are safe for longer periods of time. As the nuclear waste continues to cool down at SONGS so it can be transported, this legislation would ensure that the Nuclear Regulatory Commission raises its safety standards to more than double the design life requirement from 40 years to 100 years.

Particularly at a time when Congress is considering further nuclear energy development, we must consider the technology's full life span, long-term impact, and environmental risks. I am concerned that charging ahead and expanding nuclear energy production without a solution for nuclear waste is irresponsible and could result in a future, preventable crisis.

While I have been laser focused on spent nuclear fuel challenges, I recognize there is a long road ahead that will require many difficult conversations. But I am committed to working across the aisle on long-term policy solutions that our district and country desperately need.

The future of SONGS and other shutdown sites may seem complicated, but the good news is that over the last few years the government has made progress. I am confident that we can solve nuclear waste issues – and almost any issue – if we work together in a bipartisan manner.

Mike Levin represents California's 49th congressional district.

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