



Statement by Congressman Doc Hastings
on
H.R. 2729, to authorize the designation of National Environmental Research Parks
July 20, 2009

Mr. Speaker, the nuclear weapons production program at Hanford played a critical role in our nation's defense for decades – securing victories in World War II and the Cold War.

Today, the 586-square-mile Hanford Site, which is located in the congressional district that I represent and in the community that I've called home for over 50 years, is undergoing the largest and most complex nuclear waste cleanup effort in the world.

While nuclear cleanup will continue at Hanford for decades, the local community is already looking towards life post-cleanup and is actively engaged in discussing its future and economy once this massive undertaking is completed. Clearly, the possible beneficial use of portions of land on this massive site to diversify the economy and ensure a robust post-cleanup future are options that must be open and available. As just one possible example, consideration is being given by the Department of Energy and local communities to proposals to use a piece of Hanford lands for an Energy Park. Other ideas on how to use these suitable lands include nuclear activities such as medical isotope production and uranium enrichment for fuel rod production that would power nuclear energy reactors.

At a time when decisions about future uses of lands on the Hanford Site have yet to be made, it is critical that this Congress and the federal government maintain flexibility in order to keep all options on the table – and not enact legislation that could complicate or prohibit future activities, thereby preempting the very conversations that are underway today.

Mr. Speaker, as originally introduced, H.R. 2729 would have designated the Hanford Site and surrounding lands as a permanent protected National Environmental Research Park, or NERP.

While I believe it appropriate for portions of the Hanford Site to conduct activities consistent with the NERP mission, I have very serious concerns about rushing through permanent decisions on Hanford lands via legislation that was introduced last month with zero input from either the Tri-Cities community or their elected Representative.

That's why I have been working with the Science Committee on trying to identify and agree on ways to modify and improve the bill to fully protect the unique and complex Hanford site. My overriding goal in pursuing modifications was to avoid serious unintended consequences that could very well result from H.R. 2729, including the creation of yet another overlapping land use management authority at Hanford and the permanent lockdown of future land use decisions.

I have made several suggestions to the Committee including language to: 1) enable the Secretary of Energy to modify the boundaries of the NERP, 2) exclude privately-owned lands and state lands, 3) ensure that nothing in the bill will restrict, limit or condition the ability of the Department to lease, convey or transfer lands, 4) ensure that no new land use or regulatory authority is created, 5) clearly state that this new law could not be used to launch lawsuits, and 6) to make certain that the NERP authorization is aimed at the intent of facilitating long-term research and promoting education outreach, rather than the establishment of a restrictive land use designation that could block or stifle future decisions. I support the stated intent of this legislation's authors and proponents to encourage research and education, but I fear that the language of the bill as written could be interpreted to cause real harm to the future of Hanford and the local community.

I very much appreciate the consideration of Ranking Member Hall, and the willingness of Chairman Gordon, Subcommittee Chairman Baird and Representative Lujan to listen and discuss my concerns over the past week. In the end, clarifying language that I felt was necessary to protect the interests of those I was elected to represent was not agreeable to the Committee, and they instead chose to remove Hanford from the bill altogether.

While I believe we all would have preferred an outcome that was acceptable to all Members, which did not prove possible in the past week, and the removal of Hanford from the bill is an appropriate course of action.

It took many years for the federal government to produce the massive volumes of nuclear waste at Hanford, and it will take many more years to complete the cleanup of these wastes. There is absolutely no reason to rush through legislation that could make cleanup at Hanford more difficult or take away the flexibility to make decisions on the future of the Site and the surrounding communities.