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Sick nuke workers spark Hill interest

By Amy Fagan
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Some lawmakers are trying to force the Energy Department to hand over a program that processes claims of sick nuclear workers to the Labor Department because of poor handling.

Sen. Charles E. Grassley, Iowa Republican, and others say the Energy Department's program is not adequately processing claims from workers suspected of becoming ill by exposure to radiation or other harmful substances while employed by Energy Department contractors. The program is supposed to determine whether they are eligible for state workers' compensation.

A Louisiana contractor that helps administer the Energy Department's program is fighting the move with help from Louisiana lawmakers, according to the Project on Government Oversight, an independent watchdog group.

Louisiana-based Science and Engineering Associates (SEA) will lose business if the program is moved, says the Project on Government Oversight.

Mr. Grassley added a provision to the energy and water spending bill that would transfer key parts of the program to the Labor Department. It's not in the House bill, and House and Senate negotiators must decide whether to keep it in the final bill.

Calls to SEA were not immediately returned.

According to the watchdog group, SEA has hired lobbyists to fight the provision. And Louisiana Democratic Sens. John B. Breaux and Mary L. Landrieu tried to help by opposing the provision in a Sept. 26 letter to Sen. Pete V. Domenici, New Mexico Republican and chairman of the Senate Appropriations subcommittee that handles the energy and water spending bill.

The senators said the transfer

of the program to the Labor Department would lead to even more delay, and "directly impacts a key employer in our state."

Mr. Breaux said last week: "Energy is committed to fixing it and should be given the opportunity to do that."

Mr. Grassley and others disagree. "The need for changing agencies is immediate and urgent," read an Oct. 17 letter sent by Mr. Grassley and seven others to Mr. Domenici and Nevada Sen. Harry Reid, the top Democrat on Mr. Domenici's subcommittee.

According to Energy Department statistics, of the 20,725 claims filed as of Oct. 24, 2003, a total of 14,693 are awaiting development, 3,932 are being developed, and 100 have final decisions sent to applicants. The Government Accounting Office has estimated the Energy Department will need seven years to work off its backlog.

The Department of Labor already runs a related program that determines whether sick Energy Department workers are eligible for federal compensation. It has processed more than 94 percent of the 35,832 claims it has received.

An aide to Mr. Domenici said it was "up in the air" whether the Grassley proposal would end up in the final bill, but added that the House "vehemently opposes" it.

Since the 1998 election cycle, SEA executives or their spouses contributed \$7,000 to Mr. Domenici and \$7,750 to Mrs. Landrieu, according to statistics compiled by the Project on Government Oversight, which came from the Center for Responsive Politics.

Lead House negotiator Rep. David L. Hobson, Ohio Republican and chairman of the House Appropriations energy and water panel, said the House is "not going to accept" the Grassley proposal.