

Senate restricts plutonium cargo

WASHINGTON, D.C. — For the second time in less than a month, the Senate passed legislation that would restrict the air shipment of plutonium by requiring crash tests of containers and also an Environmental Impact Statement must be done before the routes would be labeled safe.

The legislation, cosponsored by Sen. Ted Stevens and authored by Sen. Frank Murkowski, was adopted recently as an amendment to the Omnibus Veterans' Benefits and Services Act of 1987.

The amendment would prohibit air shipment of plutonium unless the routes are evaluated in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act and the plutonium is carried in a cask certified safe by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Under the amendment, before certifying casks as safe, the NRC would have to test a full-scale sample container, loaded with test material, by the best practicable means for simulating actual transportation conditions.

The agency would also be required to conduct an actual crash test of a cargo aircraft carrying a container which would include an actual drop test from a maximum cruising altitude.

NRC must provide for public comment and review the results of the tests under the amendment.

Murkowski believes that the shipments will be possible if handled differently than radioactive materials have been in the past.

"The experiences of our veterans teach us an important lesson," said Murkowski. "We were not careful enough to avoid serious health risks associated with radioactive materials."

Murkowski said he is coordinating with Congressman Don Young to have the House adopt the Senate language on plutonium when the bill comes before both groups in a conference committee.

Also, the U.S./Japan plutonium agreement, negotiated last month, would permit air shipments of plutonium via Alaska. The treaty was transmitted to the Senate November 10.

The Senate and House have 90 days of continuing session in which to review it and the agreement will go into effect unless both houses reject it.