MEASURE READ THE FIRST TIME—S. 1832

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I understand that S. 1832 introduced earlier by Senator KENNEDY is at the desk. I ask for its first reading.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the bill by title.

The bill clerk read as follows:

A bill (S. 1832) to amend the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1978 to increase the Federal minimum wage.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I now ask for its second reading and, in addition thereto, object on behalf of the majority.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I understand this bill will be read the second time on the next legislative day?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. That is correct.

Mr. REID. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

Mr. WARNER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. WARNER. The Senator from Virginia understands the parliamentary situation is I can offer a resolution, a sense of the Senate, in morning business.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senate is in morning business.

The Senator from Virginia is recognized.

Mr. WARNER. I thank the Chair.

(The remarks of Mr. WARNER pertaining to the introduction of S. Res. 211 are located in today's RECORD under ''Statements on Introduced Bills and Joint Resolutions.'')

Mr. MURKOWSKI addressed the Chair.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. HUTCHISON). The Senator from Alaska.

NUCLEAR WASTE POLICY AMENDMENTS ACT OF 1999

Mr. MURKOWSKI. Madam President, it is my understanding that it was the leader's intention to lay down the nuclear waste bill, but there has been an objection raised. As a consequence, it is my understanding that we will be discussing the bill, recognizing that there may be procedural action by the leadership at a later date regarding the disposition of this legislation.

It is my intention to simply discuss the merits of the bill for a period that would accommodate the President, as well as my colleagues, recognizing it is Friday afternoon and there are Members who perhaps have other plans.

While it is not my intention to communicate to this body every thought concerning this matter that I have. I do have, through the cooperation of my staff, probably enough material to take 6 or 7 days. Hopefully, it will not take that long to convince my colleagues that we have a problem in this country with our high-level nuclear waste program.

It is no secret there are not a number of States that are standing in line to take this waste. The fact is, most Members would wish for some type of a magic trick that would make this waste disappear. But the facts are, this waste is with us. It was created by an industry which contributes some 20 to 22 percent of the total electric energy produced in the United States. So it is our obligation to address how we are going to handle that waste.

We have, I think, like the ostrich, put our head in the sand regarding advanced technology addressing high-level nuclear waste that has advanced in other countries, particularly in France, and to a degree Great Britain and Asia.

The technology varies, but the basic premise is that spent fuel coming from our depleted cores within the reactors are taken, and through a chemical process, the plutonium is recovered and returned to the reactors as fuel. This is an oversimplification of the process, but, as a consequence, the proliferation threat of the plutonium is reduced dramatically because it is burned in the reactors. Not every existing reactor can utilize this technology, but technology is clearly available.

What is done with the rest of the waste? It is vitrified. That means the remaining waste is turned into a glass. The lifetime of that material has been reduced dramatically. It still must be stored, but it has a lesser radioactive life.

What we have here is a situation where my good friends on the other side have objected to consideration of this bill.

That objection suggests that they might have some other alternative other than simply delaying a resolution of this problem. If there is another alternative other than delay, I would hope my friends on the other side would bring that to my attention.

For the sake of full disclosure, as the junior Senator from Alaska, I do not have a constituency in my State on this issue. My hands, so to speak, from a self-interest point of view, are pretty clean. Oftentimes we have Members who are trying to foster a particular policy based on an interest in their State. We don't have high-level nuclear waste in Alaska. We have never had a nuclear power reactor, with the exception of a small program back in the early 1960s on one of our military bases. That facility has since been removed. The point is, the obligation I have is one as chairman of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee to try to get my colleagues to recognize that we collectively have a responsibility as to what we are going to do with this waste.

The industry is strangling on its waste. If we don't address it in a responsible way, the industry will decline. It will decline for a couple of reasons. The storage at many reactors is at, or almost at, the maximum limit allowed by their licenses. That means that each reactor is licensed for the amount of waste that can be stored on the site of the reactor. Many of you have been to nuclear reactors. You have seen the blue pools where the spent rods are stored. There is a limit to how much storage is available. As a consequence, we run into a situation where some reactors have reached their maximum limit under the authorization and cannot continue to operate without some relief.

That relief, as I will indicate to my colleagues, was to have been provided by the Federal Government. The Federal Government contracted with the nuclear power industry in the United States to take this waste beginning in 1998. As often is the case, the Government doesn't seem to honor the sanctity of contractual commitments to the level the private sector does. The Government was unprepared to take this waste in 1998, even though there had been a continuing effort to meet the Government's obligation by opening a facility at Yucca Mountain, in Nevada, for the permanent placement of high-level nuclear waste. To date there has been almost $7 billion expended in that process. That facility is not ready.

So what we have before us is a situation where the Government has violated its contractual commitments. The damages associated with that currently are estimated to be $40 to $80 billion. The U.S. taxpayer is going to have to accept the responsibility for these damages as a consequence of the Government's failure to initiate taking of the waste in 1998.

When you look at $40 to $80 billion, you must recognize that this obligation arises as a consequence of DOE's failure to perform the contract. This is basically damages. So we have a situation where nobody wants the waste, including the Federal Government that is contracted to take the waste as of 1998. We have a stalemate. We have an effort to ignore this waste as though it didn't exist, that it will go away. Some would even make the generalization that the Clinton administration simply does not want to address this issue on their watch.

There are all kinds of interests here. There are some of the environmental groups that don't want to see this issue resolved. They want to kill the nuclear power industry in this country. They certainly don't want to see it grow. There has not been a new reactor ordered in the United States since 1979. So we are not advancing, and we are not standing still; we are stepping back.

The consequences of this are: What are we going to do? How do we meet our obligation to provide power if, indeed, we lose a portion of our nuclear industry? Some suggest we will just reach out and find more natural gas.