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SWUtanic?



After listening to the USEC hearing on Thursday (see story on page 2) and realizing that it preceded the anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic by a day, one cannot but help to draw some parallels between USEC's current situation and the fate of that "unsinkable" ship.

The image in the hearing was clear. USEC's ship was going down, and the Congressmen clearly worried about its future viability. Bodies were already in the water, in the person of laid-off GDP workers and the stockholders who had purchased USEC shares at premium prices. Were U.S. miners far behind, weighted down by the uranium that they alleged USEC was dumping? Congress asked whether USEC's management had a plan for rescuing the company, perhaps wondering if they were simply rearranging the deck chairs as the ship continued to sink.

Our own analysis projected enrichment prices would fall. In our February 1998 Enrichment Market Outlook, the lower part of our base case range (the portion that most applied to the U.S. market), showed that prices would dip to \$85 and then to \$80. Admittedly, this has occurred somewhat more quickly than that forecast showed. However, in that same report, our low price scenario, which had a rather large probability of 30%, projected price going below \$80 by as early as last year.

Just before USEC's privatization, we also forecasted that uranium prices would be under downward pressure, returning to the \$8 range, based on the inventory transferred to USEC and USEC's announced sales plans at that time. Even lower prices were forecast for the case where DOE sold its remaining inventory. However, as noted at the time, political pressure would likely keep DOE from selling this material.

It went further than this, getting personal at times. In questioning Mr. Timbers about his compensation, the Congressmen seemed to be wondering why the captain refused to go down (financially) with his ship. In discussing his severance package, were they also taking note that Mr. Timbers had his own personal lifeboat?

None of this was very difficult to foresee. With a high-cost technology and a strong U.S. dollar working against it, USEC's prospects in the enrichment market were not good. It was also clear that the uranium market could not absorb the quantities of uranium that USEC planned to sell without negatively impacting price. As we said in the analysis, it was not even necessary for USEC to sell as much as planned, just that the market perceived that this would be the case. As an afterthought, and it is always an afterthought, it was clear that the conversion market would be punished as well.

And then there is the HEU. Before its launching, USEC was entrusted to give a safe passage to this precious cargo, and willingly took it on board. However, soon after it was underway, USEC found that this cargo was slowing it down, and threatened to jettison it, unless aid was given. There were other, faster ships from Europe passing it on the way to the U.S. market.

Now Congress and the administration are left to ponder the fate of not only USEC, but the entire front-end of the U.S. nuclear fuel cycle. It is clear that they are not encouraged by what they see. In this respect, Rep. Strickland

There is one major difference between the Titanic, which struck an iceberg, and

USEC's story. USEC's sinking has been remarked that while USEC could fail, more gradual than that of the Titanic, Congress would not allow the U.S. although it has picked up momentum nuclear fuel industry to fail. The recently. In the hearing, Mr. Timbers question is what can be done to brought up the notion that USEC faced salvage the situation. Will NRC revoke its own iceberg in the form a USEC's charter after reviewing its fundamental change in the enrichment financial viability? Will the HEU market that occurred after it privatized. oversight committee take the HEU This is simply not the case. cargo away from USEC? Will an effort be made to impound USEC's ship, in essence taking it back into the government, as implied in the hearing? Perhaps most importantly, there is the question of whether Congress and the administration will act quickly enough, before USEC slips below the surface, deal that could require the U.S. to bail sucking the U.S. industry along with it. out the ship. Their warnings went unheeded.

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