In early August 1988, Herrington proposed building two new production reactors: a heavy water reactor at Savannah River and a modular high temperature gas-cooled reactor at the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory. According to Herrington, this would establish "some sort of flexibility and back up . . . so we can keep [weapon production] options for future governments open. The dual approach, he observed, would assure that production capability was not rendered inoperative by unforeseen problems. The heavy water reactor, to be constructed on an "urgent schedule," and the modular high temperature gas-cooled reactor would produce 100 percent and 50 percent of expected tritium requirements respectively. "We don't know today what is in the future in the next 10 years," added the Secretary. "So it is a matter of assessing the risks. What is the tritium we are going to need or the plutonium we are going to need? We make our best guess today and it may not be our answer in the next 10 years. So I want some back up [capacity]." The Department estimated that it would take ten years to build the new plants at an estimated cost of $6.8 billion.[140]

A new production reactor office was established within the Department in October. The future of the two-reactor program, however, remained somewhat uncertain. Following Herrington's announcement, several influential senators expressed doubts that the Nation could afford to build two reactors. In addition, tritium requirements beyond two or three years were unclear. A new arms reduction treaty, for example, could significantly curtail tritium requirements.[141]

Global Warming

In summer 1988 Americans suffered through record-breaking heat and drought. As a result, the greenhouse effect, caused by increased amounts of primarily carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and its role in global warming attracted growing attention from scientists, politicians, and the media. Implications for energy policy were enormous. Public rhetoric included strong calls for reduced use of fossil fuels and especially coal. In late July a dozen senators led by Timothy Wirth (D-CO) introduced legislation to combat global warming by refocusing energy policy away from oil and coal and toward conservation, renewable energy, and nuclear energy. Global warming, declared Wirth, was "largely an energy problem."[142]

Reagan Administration officials generally agreed that global warming was a potentially serious problem and responded by forming an interagency task force to study the issue. Under Secretary Donna Fitzpatrick, the Department's representative on the task force, cautioned against hasty and precipitous action before global warming had been scientifically confirmed. Noting that the Department was examining long-term policy options, she said that any action would have to be "done internationally on a global basis" with "a very credible scientific assessment that other nations can accept." The key to action was solid scientific information. "We may beat our brains out and do all kinds of expensive and disruptive things," Fitzpatrick observed, "for which people will necessarily suffer by a reduced standard of living or something like that—and a reduced standard of living always means reduced health. We may do something to stop greenhouse gas accumulation and discover too late, as much as it cost us—in different kinds of costs—that we were simply watching a bigger cycle, the bigger trend caused by we don't know what."[143]

Secretary Herrington, President Reagan, and an official of the American Gas Association waiting to give their speeches before a joint meeting of the Gas Association and the World Gas Conference.
Source: U.S. Department of Energy