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Centrifuge project part of debate about loan guarantee pressures

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This 2010 photo shows a series of AC100 centrifuge machines at the American Centrifuge Plant. The centrifuge project has become the center of attention in the debate about whether the Department of Energy is being pressured to push loan guarantees through too quickly. / Gazette file photo

Written by Gregory Korte USA Today

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WASHINGTON -- Republican members of Congress investigating federal loan guarantees to now-bankrupt energy companies told Energy Secretary Steven Chu recently they never asked him to speed up similar projects in their states.

But that's exactly what some did, according to a review of 484 congressional support letters obtained by USA Today. Some letters, for example, urged quick approval of a \$2 billion loan guarantee for the American Centrifuge, a uranium enrichment project in Piketon projected to create hundreds of jobs in states including Ohio, Pennsylvania and Tennessee.

"It is imperative that this application move forward now," said a letter signed by five members of Congress, including Rep. Joe Pitts, R-Pa.

"Any delays put the project at risk," said a letter to the Office of Management and Budget signed by 15 members, including Rep. Scott DesJarlais, R-Tenn., and Rep. Sue Myrick, R-N.C.

Even as late as Nov. 4, DesJarlais signed on to another letter saying "quick action is paramount" and asking for "immediate action on funding."

That was two months after the bankruptcy of solar panel maker Solyndra, despite a \$535 million federal loan guarantee. Solyndra's failure prompted Congress to hold hearings about pressure by the White House to speed up a decision on the loan guarantee so that Vice President Biden could announce it.

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