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The Paducah nuclear fuel plant stores tens of thousands of cylinders of uranium waste that could be re-enriched and recycled. THE COURIER-JOURNAL / Copyright 1999 The Courier-Journal; NO COURIER-JOUR

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**Before the jobs come:**

The following must happen:

- GE Hitachi Global Laser Enrichment negotiates with Department Energy over the sale of the depleted uranium inventory at the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant.
- Another company, AREVA, negotiates with DOE over cylinders containing lower quality waste.
- GE Hitachi seeks license from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.
- Construction of facilities starts.

The U.S. Department of Energy has identified a new future use for its shut-down Paducah nuclear fuel plant, choosing a proposal to employ laser technology to extract uranium from vast enrichment waste stockpiled there.

The announcement raised hopes for thousands of jobs at the sprawling Western Kentucky facility, which stopped enriching uranium last summer, triggering layoffs and fears of economic doom.

Energy Department officials said they would open negotiations with [Global Laser Enrichment](#), a General Electric and Hitachi joint venture, for the sale of its depleted uranium hexafluoride inventory.

It will negotiate with a second company, [AREVA](#), to handle the site's less-valuable, off-specification uranium hexafluoride inventory, at a nuclear fuel fabrication facility in Richland, Wash., the department said.

The two potential projects will aid taxpayers by “reducing the costs of cleanup ... and creating high-paying technical jobs in the state of Kentucky,” said Deputy Secretary of Energy Daniel Poneman. “These selections represent an important next step as the department continues planning for potential future uses and ongoing cleanup efforts at the Paducah site.”

On Wednesday, local, state and federal officials celebrated the news. They have been pressing the Energy Department to keep tens of thousands of cylinders containing decades of enrichment waste on site for reprocessing.

“It's probably the biggest economic development announcement we have had since the uranium facility was built in 1951 and 1952,” said Van Newberry, McCracken County judge executive.

“It is good to know that all of the effort that people have put into this has come to fruition,” said Paducah Mayor Gayle Kaler. “We were all on the same message” in many meetings with Energy Department officials.

That message included a plea to keep as much of the waste as possible on site for recycling.

And the stockpile is huge — some 39,000, 14-ton cylinders of depleted uranium hexafluoride that blanket 700 acres on the site 10 miles west of Paducah.

Another 20,000 cylinders are at a Department of Energy facility near Piketon, Ohio, and are potentially part of the arrangement, according to DOE.

Sens. Mitch McConnell and Rand Paul, and U.S. Rep. Ed Whitfield, whose 1st District includes the Paducah site, issued a joint statement praising the company.

“It is our understanding that GE proposes to invest over \$1 billion to create a state-of-the-art laser enrichment facility at the DOE site that will create thousands of construction jobs, and hundreds of permanent jobs at a future GE facility,” they said.

They also said the proposal would would “help revive the U.S. domestic nuclear supply chain, while likely generating billions of dollars in new tax revenues for the local, state and federal government.”

Gov. Steve Beshear called the news “a positive development in our long effort to ensure a promising future for the workers at that facility. This is a strong step toward energizing that sector of our economy, while providing economic stability and investment for the Paducah community.”

He said “a great deal of work remains” and said that he was “cautiously optimistic regarding this new effort.”

The federal government began enriching uranium at the Paducah plant in 1952, first for use in nuclear weapons, and later for nuclear power plants. The U.S. Department of Energy owns the plant, leasing it to USEC, which stopped enriching uranium there in June.

The World War II-era technology used huge amounts of electricity, enough to power a city the size of Nashville, and had become too costly.

USEC spokeswoman Georgann Lookofsky declined to say what the announcement meant for her company, referring questions to a corporate office, which did not return a voice message. USEC has been developing more efficient uranium enrichment gas centrifuge technology at its plant near Piketon, Ohio.

Newberry said as many as 1,100 people had worked for USEC, before layoffs. Some of those laid off have found work with cleanup crews or other contractors at the 5.5-square-mile site, which still faces decades of environmental remediation.

Taxpayers have already paid out \$2 billion for cleanup work since 1988.

Newberry said plant and site workers come from 12 Kentucky counties and eight Illinois counties, and salaries in the \$100,000 range “have put a lot of kids through college,” and the plant’s shutdown had triggered a bipartisan effort to fight for those jobs.

There are now hopes that new GE jobs and continued environmental cleanup will keep the workforce going with equally or better paying jobs, but he said it will be critical for government to continue to meet its cleanup obligations.

A spokesman for GE Hitachi Global Laser Enrichment, however, said it could be a few years before a new plant is in operation.

Christopher White, the spokesman, acknowledged that the laser technology was not yet in commercial operation anywhere in the world. But he said the company had successfully tested it at a facility in North Carolina.

If negotiations are successful with the Energy Department, the company would need to get a license for the new Paducah facility in what White described as a “multiyear” effort.

With negotiations pending, he said it’s too soon to say how much money the company would invest in building the plant. But he agreed that thousands could be employed during construction with hundreds of potential permanent jobs.

The company plans to use the laser technology to extract the remaining natural uranium in the waste cylinders, he said.

“We think there is enough material there to rival uranium mines,” he said. “We would, in effect, be a uranium mine.”