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TRIDEC says 2016 is poor time to cut cleanup money
Tri-City Herald
March 10, 2015
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At a time that the Department of Energy's overall budget is increasing, the Obama administration's budget requests for environmental cleanup of nuclear weapons sites are dropping, says the Tri-City Development Council.

The proposed cut comes despite both sides of Congress repeatedly supporting the federal government's legal and moral obligations to clean up Hanford and other sites, TRIDEC said in a letter sent to members of Washington's congressional delegation.

The cleanup budget request has declined as demands on the program are increasing, from the rising costs at the Hanford vitrification plant to the need to honor international agreements for a South Carolina mixed oxide fuel plant and the need to restart the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico after two accidents in early 2014.

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The proposed cut would come as federal projects might again face forced budget cuts called sequestration, following the financial relief for fiscal 2014 and 2015 negotiated by Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., and Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis.

The administration's proposed budget would help with the increasing costs of the vitrification plant, work to start treating waste at the plant as soon as 2022 and better protect workers from chemical vapors.

But it appears to come at the expense of momentum to clean up Hanford along the Columbia River, the letter said.

Robbing the Richland Operations Office or other DOE sites across the nation to support the vit plant and tank farms, under the Hanford Office of River Protection, is not the right answer, TRIDEC said. The Office of River Protection would get an increase of about \$200 million under the administration's budget request.

But the proposed cut of almost \$100 million for work along the Columbia River would undercut progress "and literally stop several of the high-priority risk reduction projects underway along the Columbia River," TRIDEC said in the letter.

"That would be a very unfortunate occurrence given the proximity of the Columbia River and the city of Richland to these last remaining high-rad waste sites, and the investments the Congress has already made in the engineering, design, training and preparations for this work to be completed," it said.

The Department of Energy "should be loudly and proudly celebrating the tremendous success" of cleanup along the river.

Some 321 buildings out of 331 have been decontaminated and demolished; 89 percent of 585 waste sites have been cleaned up and all of the legally binding deadlines have been reached on time or ahead of schedule, the letter said. One deadline, for the 324 Building, was extended after a highly radioactive spill was found beneath it.

The final completion of several important projects near the river would be delayed because of the proposed budget cut, costing more taxpayer dollars in the long run.

TRIDEC is requesting a \$119.5 million increase to the fiscal 2016

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budget for the Richland Operations Office, which is responsible for all Hanford work except for the tank farms and vit plant.

It includes an increase of \$25 million for the 324 Building, with an additional \$15 million required in fiscal 2017 to complete decontamination and remove the radioactive contamination beneath the building over 18 months. Digging is proposed to be done with equipment placed within the building.

Halting or deferring work would cost an additional \$5 million per year just to keep the building safe and with electric service.

If radioactive materials are not removed, repairs to the roof and the structure of the building would eventually be required to keep precipitation from reaching the contaminated hot cell that leaked radioactive cesium and strontium into the soil beneath the building, the letter said.

The cleanup of the contamination and spilled waste would greatly reduce the risk to the nearby Columbia River, and demolition of the building could be left for a future date, according to TRIDEC.

The additional money requested by TRIDEC also includes a \$5 million increase to help support the new Manhattan Project National Historical Park at Hanford.

Some money is needed to get the park underway while DOE and National Park Service management plans are being developed, the letter said.

The \$5 million could be spent on stabilization or rehabilitation of historic facilities planned to be featured in the park and infrastructure improvements needed to support many new visitors to the park.

The requested increase also would be used to move radioactive sludge stored underwater at the K West Basin to central Hanford and to move more than 1,900 cesium and strontium capsules to dry storage. They now are stored underwater in a deteriorating pool at the Waste Encapsulation Storage Facility.

TRIDEC supports the proposed increased budget for the tank farms and vit plant, but warned that an even larger increase would be required in fiscal 2017, plus more money for utilities, roads and securities to allow operations at the plant.

US Senate considers funding for MOX at Savannah River Site

The State

March 12, 2015

[LINK](#)

WASHINGTON — Congress may spend another \$345 million next year on a South Carolina facility designed to recycle weapons-grade plutonium, even as the federal Energy Department explores whether there are faster or cheaper alternatives.

The funding request for the Mixed Oxide Fuel Fabrication Facility, or MOX, at Savannah River Site near Aiken was questioned by Senate appropriators at a hearing Wednesday on the fiscal 2016 federal budget.

The facility, over budget and behind schedule, will convert the plutonium into fuel for nuclear reactors. But the Obama administration and some members of Congress have raised questions about whether different technology should be considered before construction is finished.

“I don’t want to look back and say... well, \$600 million has been wasted,” said Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif.

Obama’s attempt to put the MOX project into “cold standby” was derailed by Congress, meaning construction continues, at a cost of \$345 million in fiscal 2015 and possibly another \$345 million next year.

But the search for alternatives goes on.

The National Nuclear Security Administration’s administrator testified Wednesday that the first of two reports by outside experts is due in mid-April.

Retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Frank Klotz said the first independent report will compare finishing the MOX fuel fabrication process to a different process that would dilute the plutonium until it’s not recoverable, then dispose of it in a special facility in New Mexico. A second report, due in September, will look at other possibilities.

“We’re hoping the external look, as requested by Congress, will give us a more solid grounding in terms of specific cost estimates associated with various alternatives,” Klotz said.

The MOX facility is more than three years behind schedule and at least \$3 billion over budget. The Energy Department estimates the MOX will cost \$30 billion to operate over its entire life, but that figure is disputed by MOX advocates in South Carolina.

Russia and the U.S. are each supposed to destroy 34 metric tons of plutonium as part of an international agreement.

“The goal of disposing of weapons-grade plutonium is certainly worthy, but the cost is enormous,” Feinstein said.

It’s not clear if the Senate Appropriations Committee will try to adjust the \$345 million request for MOX when it drafts a fiscal 2016 spending bill for the Energy Department.

The MOX project has strong defenders on the committee, including GOP Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina. Graham says the alternative disposal options would require renegotiating the deal with Russia and that abandoning MOX would violate an agreement between the federal government and South Carolina.

Wednesday’s hearing before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Energy and Water included an update on the uranium processing facility to be built at the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge.

Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., chairman of the subcommittee, said the National Nuclear Security Administration is requesting \$430 million in fiscal 2016 for design, safety analysis and site preparation for the processing facility.

As part of an agreement to avoid cost overruns, Klotz said, construction of the three main buildings won’t begin until the design is 90 percent complete, expected sometime during fiscal 2017. He said work is on track to have the facility operating by 2025 and to stay within the \$6.5 billion construction budget.

“I’m encouraged based on where we were two to three years ago in terms of big projects,” Alexander said.

Idaho Falls Mayor Casper Defends INL Activities

Op-Ed

March 10, 2015

Last week, two former Idaho Governors threatened to sue the U.S. Department of Energy for planning to ship spent nuclear fuel to the Idaho National Laboratory (INL) for study, what they claim is a violation of federal environmental law. That story can be found [here](#). In response, Idaho Falls Mayor Rebecca Casper wrote the following editorial that has been shared by the city and INL on Facebook, Twitter, and in the Post Register:

As mayor of the city which hosts the Idaho National Laboratory and which, like most of Eastern Idaho, enjoys the fruits of good relationships with DOE officials, laboratory personnel and responsible contractors, I offer comment about Thursday's press release from former Governors Batt and Andrus.

No one understands the need for clean-up to occur promptly better than the Eastern Idaho citizens who live and work at and around the site. Yet we all understand that speed is not the driving factor. This process needs to be managed properly and that means giving all due attention to current safety standards, updated risk assessments, present-day facts, modern technology and today's political and economic climate.

Also of importance is the need to proceed with an abundance of concern for the many Idahoans who earn a living at the site. In today's economy it is simply imprudent to risk jobs and opportunity for our citizens—and in the name of what? Haste?

We cannot be cavalier about this. While we owe much to these former governors for getting us to a position of strength today, now it is time for current elected officials to run with the ball. Indeed, it is we who now are accountable for service that is in the best interest of the state and local communities.

Thursday's unexpected announcement puts at risk the very nature of the work that our nation's lead nuclear laboratory is commissioned to do—which is scientific research. In the current competitive climate we cannot afford the outdated thinking that links our Lab's research mission with the site's clean-up objectives. What comes to mind is the old adage about cutting off one's nose ...

And then factor in that the push to allow research quantities of spent fuel into Idaho has been public for some time. There were numerous discussions in the press in 2011—all without significant public outcry. As a Commission Member to the Governor's

Leadership in Nuclear Energy (LINE2.0) Commission, I have participated in many public discussions and myself have referred to the information at LINE.GOV where the issue has been discussed and posted for all to see.

I emphasize the need for informed dialog as we chart the state's nuclear path forward. There simply is no room for hyperbole. I invite those who truly care to be informed to come to our city and see firsthand how safely this work will be done and how research fuel will be stored. Come tour the INL—especially if it has been a while since you have been here. Register at www.inl.gov.

I believe in the good solid science that drives the work out on the desert. I support a reasoned approach to problem-solving. How we proceed now will deeply affect and define this region. It will surely impact our state. It will shape our nation. It could change the world.

Rebecca Casper
Mayor, City of Idaho Falls

Yucca Mountain Environmental Impact Statement Supplement

Federal Register
March 12, 2015

[LINK](#)

Summary: The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) is informing the public of its intent to prepare a supplement to the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE's) "Final Environmental Impact Statement for a Geologic Repository for the Disposal of Spent Nuclear Fuel and High-Level Radioactive Waste at Yucca Mountain, Nye County, Nevada" (February 2002), and its "Final Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement for a Geologic Repository for the Disposal of Spent Nuclear Fuel and High-Level Radioactive Waste at Yucca Mountain, Nye County, Nevada" (July 2008). The NRC staff determined in September 2008 that it is practicable to adopt, with further supplementation, the DOE's environmental impact statements (EISs). The NRC staff concluded that the EISs did not address adequately all of the repository-related impacts on groundwater or from surface discharges of groundwater.

Schedule: The NRC staff intends to issue the draft supplement in the late summer of 2015 and announce the availability of the

supplement in the Federal Register, via email distribution, in a press release, on the NRC's Web site, and in media in Nevada. A public comment period will start upon publication of the NRC's Notice of Availability in the Federal Register. During the public comment period, the NRC plans to a public meeting at NRC headquarters in Rockville, Maryland, two public meetings in Nevada, and a public conference call.

DOE on agency's Yucca visit: Nothing to see here

Las Vegas Review-Journal

March 11, 2015

[LINK](#)

WASHINGTON — The Department of Energy has moved to end speculation over the future of Yucca Mountain, telling Congress there are no plans in the works to put the once-proposed radioactive waste site to new use.

A department executive said DOE has received no proposal from the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, or DTRA, which sent a half dozen officials to the Nevada site last month. The tour went inside the 25-foot-wide tunnel that was carved into the mountain for nuclear waste studies.

Further, said John Kotek, principal deputy assistant secretary for nuclear energy, “we have been informed that DTRA does not intend to make such a proposal.”

Kotek relayed the message in a letter to the leaders of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. The letter dated March 4 was made available by the committee on Wednesday.

Committee Chairman Fred Upton, R-Mich., had asked Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz for an explanation of reports that the department and the defense agency had discussions involving use of the Yucca site, about 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

A report in an energy trade publication based on an unnamed source said the defense agency was searching for suitable tunnels to perform “catastrophe scenarios” that could include studying the effects of an underground train derailment.

The agency is charged with developing strategy and tactics for the government to counter threats from biological, nuclear and chemical weapons, and high explosives.

Upton, joined by subcommittee Chairmen Reps. John Shimkus, R-Ill., and Tim Murphy, R-Pa., told Moniz using Yucca Mountain for anything other than nuclear waste could violate federal law.

The site is still covered by law even though the Obama administration terminated the nuclear waste program in 2010. Republicans and some Democrats in Congress are trying to resurrect it.

A Defense Threat Reduction Agency spokesman confirmed that agency professionals were on the Yucca site on Feb. 17, but described the visit as a one-time deal and one of the agency's periodic visits to underground facilities to deepen understanding of their characteristics.

Further details of what was being examined would likely be classified, the agency said. Neither the agency nor the Department of Energy has disclosed how much it cost to open the mothballed site to visitors, and who paid the bill.

"DTRA has not and will not be doing any testing at the Yucca Mountain site," spokesman Daniel Gaffney said last week in answer to queries.

In his letter, Kotek said, "DTRA is better suited to discuss the plans of that agency but I can tell you that DOE has not received a proposal from DTRA to use the Yucca Mountain site for any purpose."

Shimkus, who has said he plans to visit the Yucca site later this year, "is satisfied with the response and will remain watchful to ensure that the facility is only used for its lawful and intended purpose," spokesman Jordan Haverly said.