

ECA Update: September 17, 2015



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Hanford nuclear waste is truly a mixed bag (high-level, low-level, transuranic, greater-than-Class C). This includes medical wastes from hospitals, spent commercial fuel from Columbia Generating Station, and 124 Navy reactor cores from submarines and cruise missiles.

Hanford cleanup is technically challenging, yet cleanup has been moving ahead. However, nuclear waste is currently stuck at Hanford. Is Hanford an "interim storage" site without ever being declared so? In a word, "yes!"

One example of DOE's ever changing signals and direction on final disposition of nuclear waste has to do with the large quantity of plutonium Hanford has already shipped to Savannah River.

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The current option for disposing of our nation's plutonium is to use a special facility to mix quantities of plutonium with other nuclear fuel to make mixed-oxide (mox) fuel that can be used in civilian reactors to produce power while using up the plutonium.

A 2000 international agreement with Russia identified this method for disposing the inventory of plutonium. By early 2007 the decision was made to construct a mox fuel plant at the Savannah River Site (SRS), in South Carolina. Construction is 70 percent complete, and some \$4.5 billion has been spent.

After 15 years on the current path, DOE-Headquarters is now considering major/arbitrary changes to the final disposition of MOX, and stopping construction the mox facility at SRS!

DOE's new path is considering 'downblending' (diluting) the weapons grade plutonium and adding it to waste going to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) in New Mexico. DOE reports shutting down the SRS mox plant could cost a billion dollars.

WIPP is a massive underground repository built for permanent storage of transuranic waste (clothing, tools, and other materials contaminated with plutonium and other radionuclides). WIPP operations were suspended in 2014 by a fire and a small radiation release. WIPP remains closed, and there is no firm date for reopening.

Nevertheless DOE officials are talking about adding tons of downblended weapons-grade plutonium to the storage mix at WIPP. Doing this, according to one expert, would exceed WIPP's capacity by 48 percent and would contain eight times the allowable radionuclide content (curies). Attempting to add downblended mox to WIPP raises a host of legal, regulatory and political questions; and disrupts current plans to move even the transuranic waste from Hanford once WIPP reopens.

Various consultant reports have compared the costs of completing the SRS mox plant with downblending mox for burial at WIPP, but the results are inconclusive on which option is less costly. What is clear, however, is that using mox as a fuel for nuclear power plants was studied and approved by the National Academy of Sciences in 1995, and it was embraced by the Clinton, Bush and (until recently) Obama administrations.

The Savannah River mox project was America's response to the

nonproliferation agreement with Russia (the Plutonium Management and Disposition Agreement) that was signed in 2000 and updated in 2010. Both countries committed to eliminating 34 metric tons of surplus weapons-grade plutonium by conversion to mox. 34 metric tons is enough to support 17,000 nuclear weapons!

Reversing course with the downblending/WIPP option is risky, given the problems that have shutdown WIPP and could result in further delays and additional costs. Terminating the SRS mox facility also raises the specter that Hanford plutonium already shipped to Savannah River for processing could be returned. South Carolina could well say, “We don’t want Hanford’s heavy metal plutonium if there is no mox facility; ship it back to them!”

The real risk is that by changing course at this point, Hanford could once again be left holding the bag. With a new administration in just 16 months, a ‘new’ DOE could decide that ‘downblending’ of plutonium and disposal in WIPP is also not the best option, leaving us with no pathway for Hanford’s plutonium.

So “yes,” Hanford continues to be an Undeclared Interim Storage site, which cancelling mox only compounds. Also, “no,” we don’t want the plutonium coming back to Hanford.

The best course for Hanford is to complete the mox facility at Savannah River.

Gary Petersen is Vice President of Federal Programs for the Tri-City Development Council.

Feds halt uranium enrichment project at southern Ohio plant; Oak Ridge facility holds more promise

Knoxville News Sentinel

September 12, 2015

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PIKETON, Ohio (AP) — Ohio officials are criticizing an announcement by the government to halt a southern Ohio uranium enrichment project in favor of similar work being done in Tennessee.

The U.S. Department of Energy said Friday it will end its contract for the American Centrifuge Project in Piketon at the end of the month. A statement from the Energy Department and the National Nuclear Security Administration says the project's 120 centrifuges provided valuable data on centrifuge technology but a facility in

Oak Ridge, Tennessee, shows more promise.

"We have concluded that continued support from the federal government for additional data from Piketon operations has limited remaining value," the statement said.

The move affects about 235 employees at the site, according to Centrus Energy, the operator of the plant.

The news follows a warning from a company decontaminating and cleaning up the plant that a federal budget gap could mean more than 500 layoffs among its own employees, affiliated personnel and subcontractors.

Those layoffs could occur around Oct. 22, but the project's director and other leaders remain hopeful they'll get funding needed to continue their current pace, which costs roughly \$387 million annually, according to Fluor-BWXT Portsmouth, the main clean-up contractor.

The Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion Plant in Piketon produced enriched uranium for defense and commercial uses until 2001. Its shutdown left behind chemicals and radioactive areas to be addressed and huge buildings to be demolished — work that is taking decades and employs about 1,800 people in a pocket of high unemployment.

U.S. Sen. Rob Portman, a Cincinnati Republican, called the news a blow to Piketon and southeastern Ohio and another broken promise by the administration of President Barack Obama to support the site.

U.S. Rep. Tim Ryan, a Youngstown Democrat, said the decision was disappointing.

"I will continue to work with the Ohio business community to do everything in our power to ensure that the Piketon facility can continue to do its important work and transition to operate commercially," Ryan said.

Hanford's high-tech future: New DOE cleanup leader looks to robotics to keep next generation of workers safe

Tri-City Herald

September 13, 2015

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What do an astronaut and a Hanford tank farm worker have in common?

Both have to wear heavy equipment and must breathe in an artificial atmosphere, said Monica Regalbuto at the conclusion of her first visit to Hanford last week as the newly confirmed head of environmental cleanup at Department of Energy sites.

She talked about her interest in developing technology — including technology that might be helpful for NASA and for Hanford — during brief remarks at a meeting of the Hanford Advisory Board and in an interview with the Herald.

DOE used to have a significant technology development program, which led to breakthroughs that have contributed to environmental cleanup, Regalbuto said.

But as cleanup projects reached the point where work could be done, technology development decreased.

“Our investments from the past, we are cashing in on,” she said.

Now Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz and his advisory board are looking ahead to future technology needs as the nation faces 50 years of work to complete cleanup. The remaining work across the complex is the most difficult, Regalbuto said.

“Our goal is to use technology to allow us to reduce the cost so we can get through our mission more quickly and more expeditiously,” she said.

Technology development also is an opportunity to bring the next generation of workers into DOE projects as national laboratories and cleanup contractors face a wave of workers ready for retirement, she said.

Young people will understand why cleanup is important work and why they should be excited about working on it, she said.

Some of the technology development is being done in coordination with other DOE offices.

The DOE Office of Science is spearheading an effort using its budget to look at what DOE’s cleanup needs are so the Office of Science can develop programs to address them, she said.

In a broader effort, the DOE Office of Environmental Management, headed by Regalbuto, has joined the National Robotics Initiative, led by the White House.

“It’s a multiagency effort, but we all have similar issues,” she said. When the robotics initiative was started in 2011, one of its goals was to help astronauts in dangerous and expensive missions.

Just like astronauts wearing heavy suits and relying on air supplies, tank farm workers at Hanford now carry heavy supplied air canisters and rely on them to breath, she said.

“Our main goal is to improve safety, improve the safety of the worker, but also to improve the safety of the facility,” she said.

One of her stops during two and half days at Hanford was the HAMMER training facility, where she watched workers training to use supplied air respirators by playing miniature golf in the cumbersome gear.

Much of her visit focused on the work at Hanford other than the tank farms, where 56 million gallons of radioactive waste is held in underground tanks, and the vitrification plant under construction to treat the waste. The waste, and other contamination at Hanford, is left from World War II and Cold War production of plutonium for the nation’s nuclear weapons program.

Regalbuto made her first visit to Hanford in 1989 when she was just out of graduate school as part of her work to support tank waste programs. She also was picked by former Energy Secretary Steven Chu to join him on an expert panel that several three days at Hanford reviewing technical issues at the vitrification plant three years ago. She was confirmed as assistant secretary for environmental management last month.

Her biggest surprise on this visit to Hanford was what she did not see — many buildings along the Columbia River. In the Hanford 300 Area just north of Richland, 209 buildings and other structures have been demolished.

“If I don’t see something, it is a very good thing,” she said. “That means a lot of progress and a lot of people’s effort.”

The remaining unused building left there from Hanford’s plutonium production days, the 324 Building, continues to stand because of a spill of high-level radioactive waste beneath it.

It was “a very bad day for us” when the spill was discovered during cleanup, she said. A plan has been developed to dig up the soil using remotely operated equipment staged within the building and a mockup has been built to develop the technology.

Cleanup of the spill remains a priority, but the cost of completing cleanup of the building is higher because of the spill, she said. Proceeding with digging up the contaminants depends on the budget, and in the meantime the spill is monitored to make sure contaminants do not migrate toward groundwater, she said.

Concerns have been raised in the Tri-City community that getting adequate money for Hanford work under the DOE Richland Operations Office may be a challenge as a federal judge prepares to set new consent decree deadlines for the tank farms and vitrification plant that could require higher funding. The DOE Office of River Protection is in charge of the tanks and vit plant and the Richland Operations Office is in charge of the rest of cleanup work.

“They are two independent missions, both critically important to us,” Regalbuto said.

Both have different tasks and one will not compete against another, she said. Although much progress is visible in the land along the Columbia River, difficult projects remain near the river and in central Hanford.

Editorial: Shutdown only brings more economic harm

Aiken Standard

September 10, 2015

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A clear need exists for Congress to showcase something that has been rare throughout a contentious year in Washington, D.C. – cooperation between Republicans and President Barack Obama.

It will take a strong sense of give and take on both sides to reach a needed budgetary agreement by the end of the month. Congress needs to come to a broad new agreement by Oct. 1 that lifts legally imposed spending caps or, more likely, pass a short-term measure, known as a continuing resolution, to keep the government operational for the rest of the year.

Obama has vowed to veto any spending bills that do not lift these

caps on domestic spending, and Democrats have said they will block any long-term measures to fund the government without such changes. Republicans are gearing up for a fight to stop any spending bill that provides federal health care money to Planned Parenthood in an attempt to divert money from that organization to other health clinics. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, however, has already conceded that Republicans in Congress don't have the votes to defund Planned Parenthood and that the issue will have to wait at least until 2017 when there's a new administration in the White House.

It's clear the country doesn't need a replay of 2013 when lawmakers failed to reach a budgetary agreement, resulting in a 16-day government shutdown. This isn't a time for more drama in our nation's capital. This is a time to avoid marching off a budgetary cliff.

The impact of a shutdown – with its furloughs and missed paychecks – extends to government agencies, as well as contractors, both in Washington, D.C. and beyond. For instance, during the 2013 shutdown, approximately 1,400 employees of Savannah River Remediation, the liquid waste contractor for the Savannah River Site, were furloughed for nearly three weeks. These furloughs came less than a month after Savannah River Remediation announced 465 layoffs to its staff.

Repeating such a stark reality could only do harm to the local economy. Also, on a larger scale, a shutdown would dent an economy in the U.S. that has strengthened in recent months and been a relatively bright spot in an otherwise volatile global economy.

Let's hope Congress and the president can come to their senses and make sure the government doesn't grind to a halt, even if that means passing a short-term, stop-gap spending measure. There's too much at risk to go down such a rabbit hole once again

Layoffs Possible At American Centrifuge Plant

Chillicothe Gazette

September 10, 2015

[LINK](#)

PIKETON — Uncertainty over funding levels beyond Sept. 30 for American Centrifuge Plant operations in Piketon has led Centrus Energy to send employees notices of possible layoffs coming in 60 days.

Jeremy Derryberry, communications manager for Centrus Energy, confirmed Thursday that Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act letters were mailed to all plant employees Wednesday informing, as required by law, of the potential for large-scale layoffs at the plant.

A meeting also was conducted with staff at the plant Wednesday in which plant managers promised to keep workers informed over the coming weeks of any new developments.

Anger, confusion surround Piketon plant situation

At the moment, Centrus is considering the move as more of a precaution in the absence of any solid commitments from the Oak Ridge National Laboratory or the U.S. Department of Energy of funding once the current contract is set to expire Sept. 30.

“Given that we now have less than three weeks of program funding, Centrus is taking the prudent step of issuing WARN notices to the affected employees,” according to a statement issued by Centrus in response to a Gazette request. “These notifications do not mean layoffs will occur or that the centrifuge program will be scaled back or demobilized, only that the potential for these actions exist.”

On the beginning of May, the U.S. House of Representatives included \$50 million in appropriations and \$50 million in DOE reprogramming authority for domestic uranium enrichment activities in the fiscal year 2016 Energy and Water Development appropriations bill.

Later that month, the Senate Appropriations Committee left those provisions in the bill that was sent to the full Senate, where it awaits debate.

Until either the approval of the bill or passage of a continuing resolution that would provide funding for the rest of this calendar year, the uncertainty over future funding will remain.

“While we have been in discussions with DOE and ORNL about an extension for the American Centrifuge Technology, Demonstration and Operations contract, DOE has not informed us of the funding it will provide for the program, if any, after Sept. 30, so we have decided it is prudent to make this notification,” Derryberry said.

Though the WARN notices have been mailed, no decisions have yet been made as to how many layoffs could result. The notices were sent to 380 workers in Ohio and Tennessee tied to the American Centrifuge project.

“Any decisions about layoffs or other actions related to scaling back or potentially demobilizing the project will be made after we understand the funding that will be provided by DOE for the program,” Derryberry said.

Centrus Energy, in its statement, said its scientific and technical workforce employed in developing the next generation of uranium enrichment technology brings about 3,400 combined years of experience to the table and is “an invaluable national asset.”

The news is a second blow to the employment situation on the Department of Energy site in Piketon.

Employees working on decontamination and decommissioning work at the former Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion Plant are facing the prospect of anywhere from 325 to 500 layoffs starting in October if an \$81 million funding shortfall for fiscal year 2016 is not addressed before then.

Aggressive letter-writing campaigns, phone calls, visits by Fluor-B&W and local government officials, and an active lobbying effort by Ohio’s congressional delegation are in full swing in hopes of addressing the shortfall in time.