

DOE tours offer glimpse into site's 60-year history

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BY DAVID ZOELLER dzoeller@paducahsun.com



Kevin Chappell, a shift coordinator, works in C-300, the Central Control Building, at the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant last week. The structure was built in 1952 and was used to monitor, coordinate and control critical plant processes including communications, alarm systems and power distribution.

For some western Kentucky residents, the U.S. Department of Energy's Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant may be "out of sight, out of mind."

Even though the plant ceased uranium enrichment operations three years ago, it remains a large employer and economic development driver for the area.

While the Paducah community has long supported the site and been familiar with its mission of national security and nuclear energy, few people not directly related with its operation have been able to see the facilities up close.

The DOE is planning to change that with tours of the site open to the public beginning later this month.

The PGDP site consists of 3,556 acres in McCracken County, 10 miles west of Paducah. The gaseous diffusion plant, within a 750-acre fenced security area, opened on the site in 1952 as a government-owned and operated facility, supplying enriched uranium for national security and energy production for 60 years. In its initial operation, it was an integral part of the country's production of enriched uranium for national security purposes.

The DOE estimates that in its 60 years of operation, the plant has pumped more than \$5 billion into the regional economy.

The United States Enrichment Corporation had leased the plant from DOE, since it was privatized by the government in 1998, and enriched uranium there for the global nuclear fuel market until ceasing operations in 2013.

In 2014, the site was returned to DOE control and a primary contractor, Fluor Federal Services, was awarded a three-year contract to continue plant cleanup and deactivation.

Fluor is coordinating the site tours to be held one Saturday a month for the next six months.

"Historically, this has been a very closed site for the general public," said Bob Nichols, Fluor Paducah Deactivation Project director of operations. "We think working with DOE is part of being a good citizen to the community."

According to Nichols, 1,500 to 1,600 employees are currently at the site between Fluor and two other contractors, Swift & Staley and B&W Conversion Services.

The PGDP's infrastructure is similar in size to that of a small city with hundreds of facilities, 19 miles of road and nine miles of railroad track. It operates as a self-sustaining community with its own water treatment, fire department, security force, post office, medical facility and sewage treatment plant.

While much has changed over the years as the plant's mission changed, the employees still maintain a sense of community, according to Nichols.

"We encourage all our employees to participate in whatever they want to do," Nichols said. "We'll have small fundraisers for people who may have a sick family member, like a chili lunch or something of that nature. We want to try to continue to build a sense of community within the fence-line, but we also support activities like the Relay for Life or United Way."

In addition to employment, the deactivation project also contributes to the business economy through the use of local vendors.

"One of our primary focuses was to meet local economic targets for small business utilization," Nichols said. "So far, under our contract I think in the five-county region we've probably spent about \$28 million within the local area. We keep an active vendor list of all the local folks and businesses here and try to utilize them."

Fluor's initial contract will be completed in July 2017.

Under its contract, Fluor has been involved in a variety of activities, Nichols said, including environmental remediation, infrastructure upgrades, roofing at some of the facilities, as well as some demolitions across the site.

Many of the employees laid off when USEC ceased operations were hired back by Fluor.

"I have some 40-year service people on the site today," Nichols said. "Their dedication and focus is a window back in time on the production that went on here. Their skill sets fit directly into where we are going forward.

"We still have a functioning plant in many respects from a utilities and operation perspective," Nichols said. "We're going to be doing some chemical treatment in the cells, which is not unlike the production evolutions, so all the safety parameters have to be in place and the people have to be trained commensurate to that kind of work."

The deactivation is going to take some time to complete.

Just how long "is going to depend on long-term funding," he said.

"We have scenarios in life cycle planning that takes from 40 years to well beyond that. It could take 60 years, possibly, for total site remediation, not just demolition, but restoration of the site. There is a long-term mission still ahead of us here."