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Confirmation arrives that expected October job losses have been postponed

Chillcothe Gazette

October 8, 2015

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PIKETON -- Planned layoffs at the former Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion Plant that had been scheduled to begin Oct. 22 have been averted, at least for now.

Fluor-BWXT Portsmouth, the lead site contractor for the cleanup work, has received the guidance it had been awaiting from the Department of Energy as to whether to proceed with plans to begin layoffs of between 325 and 500 workers later this month. That plan, for which WARN notices had been sent to employees notifying them of the potential layoffs, was in limbo after Congress

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passed a continuing resolution extending funding at current levels through Dec. 11.

On Wednesday, Fluor-BWXT got the confirmation they were waiting for, which site project director Dennis Carr shared in a memo to employees along with a note of cautious optimism for the longer term.

"I am pleased to report that DOE has issued us revised funding direction which permits us to postpone any reductions in force until the final appropriations Bill is passed," he wrote. "At that time, it is my understanding DOE will evaluate the appropriations language and make a final decision on the funding for the project. Until that time, we must press forward with planning for reductions in force in the event the final appropriation for our project does not provide DOE the needed funds to avoid impacts to our project.

"We must all press forward on the project with guarded optimism and focus on safely advancing the project, especially on achieving our collective goal of attaining a Cold and Dark status in X-326 (building) by June of 2017."

U.S. Sen. Rob Portman, who had a tense exchange with Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz during a hearing of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee earlier this week over funding for both the cleanup work and the American Centrifuge project on the Piketon DOE site, also sounded a cautious tone after receiving the confirmation on the cleanup reprieve.

"I'm pleased that the administration will provide the necessary funding to avoid layoffs for D&D activities in Piketon, but this is only a temporary reprieve and Ohio will need the secretary's help to secure the critical resources we will need for the remainder of the year," Portman said. "I pressed Energy Secretary Moniz on this yesterday and again requested a long-term plan for the site. I hope the administration can provide that to Piketon workers who continue to face the threat of layoffs due to no fault of their own."

During Portman's exchange with Moniz during the committee meeting, the secretary sounded a dire note for the future of the American Centrifuge operations in Piketon. Workers there are facing layoffs beginning as early as mid-November after it was announced late last month that DOE was going to de-fund the Piketon operation and shift resources for continued development of the centrifuge technology to a facility in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

There's been no indication as yet that funding appropriated in the continuing resolution that could be used to extend operations at the American Centrifuge would, in fact, be used by Moniz for that purpose.

Contractor evaporating liquid from leaking Hanford waste tank

Tri-City Herald
October 5, 2015

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The Department of Energy has begun to take some action on the Hanford tank that is believed to be leaking radioactive waste into the soil beneath it.

A portable exhauster is being used to reduce the volume of liquid in the tank that could leak. It also could reduce the rate at which waste is leaking into the ground.

The exhauster has removed about 2,000 gallons of water from Tank T-111, according to Washington River Protection Solutions, the Department of Energy contractor that manages Hanford's underground waste storage tanks. The tank holds about 436,000 gallons of radioactive waste in the form of sludge.

"The exhauster is performing as we hoped it would," said Mark Lindholm, the acting president of the tank farm contractor, in a statement. "This is an important step in the right direction as we try to minimize liquid inside T-111."

The tank is leaking waste at the rate of about 1.8 gallons per day, down from as much as 3.1 gallons a day in spring 2013, according to a Hanford report issued last year..

DOE announced in February 2013 that the tank, which was built during World War II, had a declining level of waste and appeared to be leaking. It was the first of Hanford's 149 single-shell tanks believed to be leaking after DOE completed a project to empty pumpable liquids from the aging tanks.

"DOE and Ecology agreed there was a reason to address the declining level and leak" in Tank T-111, said Jeff Lyon of the Washington State Department of Ecology, a regulator for the Hanford tanks. "They voluntarily decided to implement the technology."

The tank had an estimated 2,500 to 4,000 gallons of liquid sitting on top of the sludge when evaporation began. Initially, a 30-day test was conducted, removing the first 1,000 gallons of liquid. Since Sept. 28 about that much liquid has been removed again.

Washington River Protection Solutions said the liquid can be evaporated at a rate of 25 to 30 gallons a day.

Cameras inside the tank show a change in the amount of liquid pooled on top of the sludge, according to the tank farm contractor. It expects the exhauster to remove the pooled liquid plus dry out the top few inches of the sludge.

The tank was suspected of leaking in 1974 and a pump was used to remove as much liquid as possible then and again in 1995. Since then the level of waste has dropped at times and increased at other times, believed to be the combined effects of waste leaking from the tank and precipitation finding its way in.

An average of 130 gallons of water a year may have found its way into the tank, although that likely has varied during the years. The current leak period appears to have begun in 2000 to 2003 or possibly earlier, according to the 2014 report.

Water may have leaked into the tank from an underground concrete pit covered with a removable concrete block that was used to pump waste into the tank when Hanford was producing plutonium for the nation's nuclear weapons program.

The intrusion of precipitation into the tank may have masked the liquid waste leaking out of the tank when readings of waste volume were made, the state has said.

Exhausters have been used previously to evaporate some of the liquid from single-shell tanks, but this is the first exhauster system Washington River Protection Solutions has used to address precipitation that has gotten into a tank, according to the tank farm contractor.

The pooled water is suspected to be a combination of water getting into the tank and liquid remaining trapped among the waste when pumping stopped.

Washington River Protection Solutions said the tank has about 38,000 gallons of liquid throughout the sludge and resting in the layer on top of it.

Reducing the water at the top of the waste should remove some pressure on the liquid below it and should reduce the rate of leaking, said state and tank farm contractor officials.

Washington River Protection Solutions is considering using an exhauster to evaporate liquid in more than two dozen other single-shell tanks with liquid pooled on top of the waste.

“We think it’s a great project for that,” Lyon said.

The exhauster was moved to the T Tank Farm last year and parts were fabricated over the winter to allow it to be installed at Tank T-111. In operation the system vents water vapor after particulates have been trapped in filters.

“Evaporation using active ventilation costs a small fraction of new pumping technologies,” Lindholm said.

It also requires less labor than using a pump to remove liquid and the liquid does not have to be stored in Hanford’s newer double-shell tanks, which are used to hold waste emptied from single-shell tanks until it can be treated for disposal.

ORNL reactor restarts after extended maintenance outage of high importance

Frank Munger’s Atomic City Underground

October 7, 2015

[LINK](#)

The High Flux Isotope Reactor at Oak Ridge National Laboratory was restarted Tuesday following its extended fall outage — the second longest of the year — in which several projects of importance were completed.

Tim Powers, the director of ORNL’s Research Reactors Division, provided a summary of activities carried out during the shutdown period that began in mid-August. One of the biggies was installation of a new fuel grid into the vessel, he said.

“HFIR’s fuel as well as the target bundle rest on top of this device,” Powers said via email. “The last time it was replaced was in the early 2000s.”

He said workers also performed “an extremely important”

hydrostatic test that is done only about once every five years. “It involves pressurizing the system to about twice HFIR’s normal operating pressure while we check for leaks,” he said. “It takes about 100 people, and we passed.”

In addition, reactor workers also installed a “vacuum box” that will provide for better understanding of material samples that are targeted in the Biological Small Angle Neutron Scattering Detector — one of the advanced research instruments used at the ORNL reactor.

Among the other maintenance activities or repairs that took place during the lengthy outage: continued work on a number of seismic upgrades at the reactor; replaced several breakers in the electrical switch gear; installed another new Instrument Air Drier (the second of the year); replaced level switches for multiple tanks; replaced HEPA filters in various systems; repaired an outside dike that contains an acid tank; replaced portable water main isolation valves; made upgrades to an experimental device called the Materials Irradiation Test Facility; and installed new power supplies in the Guide Hall.

Powers also cited a number of corrective or preventive maintenance activities, such as repairing of power indication meters and several electrical ground faults, and work on some primary coolant pumps and electrical motor control centers.

The ORNL official said the plan is to operate the research reactor for 24 days and shut it down on Oct. 30 for an 18-day maintenance and refueling period.

Commissioners comment on SSAB recommendation

The Pike County News Watchman

October 6, 2015

[LINK](#)

Following a recommendation to the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) that was passed by the Portsmouth Site Specific Advisory Board (PORTS SSAB) on September 17, Pike County Commissioners Harry Rider, Fred Foster and Blaine Beekman weighed in with comments concerning the recommendation.

Recommendation 15-05 withdraws support for on-site disposal at the former Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion Plant at Piketon under the current conditions and recommends DOE modify the Record of Decision to strengthen DOE commitments that are required by the

community for support of on-site waste disposal.

The background information provided with the recommendation explains that the SSAB passed previous Resolution 13-02 in May 2013, outlining the board's position on waste disposition at the Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion Plant. Recommendation 13-02 supported waste disposal of some decontamination and decommissioning (D&D) waste only if DOE could explicitly meet six conditions:

1. No waste from off-site locations
2. The consolidation of landfills within Perimeter Road
3. The consolidation of plumes within Perimeter Road
4. A concerted effort to recover and recycle nickel with the understanding the nickel barrier material was prohibited from on-site disposal
5. The prohibition of any DUF6 material in any of its forms into the on-site disposal cell
6. A Department of Energy land use plan on par with the one completed for the Miamisburg Mound facility.

“Following the Proposed Plan in 2014, DOE conducted a Public Comment Period when community groups, among them the PORTS SSAB, objected to the language because it resulted in a lack of commitment from DOE on the conditions for support,” the background information for Recommendation 15-05 states in-part. “Comments were made to strengthen DOE’s language in the Record of Decision (ROD), but those comments were ignored. Under the current Record of Decision, the community has no guarantees for the cleanup program to accomplish the objective of leaving land within Perimeter Road in a suitable condition for redevelopment, which was the main purpose for our support of partial on-site disposal.

“Additionally, there is no guarantee from DOE the prohibited items outlined above would not be placed in the on-site disposal cell. The Portsmouth SSAB, elected officials, and other community groups have acted in good faith throughout this process and have no reason to question DOE’s intent as anything but genuine. However, without a firm regulatory commitment from DOE, circumstances could change in the future resulting in a change to those intentions. After all, by the time waste would be placed in the on-site disposal cell, a new administration will oversee DOE. DOE has not met the conditions for support for on-site disposal, and the community is left in a vulnerable position, and that is unacceptable.”

Recommendation 15-05 itself states that PORTS SSAB does not object to DOE's plan for D&D of the Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion Plant but only the lack of commitment from DOE to complete the project in a manner that will foster future development.

"The board understands the need for DOE to continue On-Site Waste Disposal Facility construction efforts to align with D&D activities and does not object to those efforts continuing, but DOE should recognize the community expects these regulatory deficiencies to be addressed before any waste placement occurs," the recommendation states in-part. "In other words, DOE's construction efforts should be considered at risk until the community's conditions for support of on-site disposal are satisfied."

In a letter to Will Henderson, chair of the PORTS SSAB, the Pike County Commissioners stated their thoughts upon review of the recommendation.

"We share the concerns listed in your bullet points, but our responses are quite dissimilar, reflecting our very different responsibilities," the commissioners' letter states in-part. "As an advisory board, the SSAB was comfortable issuing a basic ultimatum that until the bulleted issues were addressed, the SSAB was withdrawing its support for the onsite disposal cell.

"As elected officials in almost constant negotiation with DOE on various site issues, the Pike County Commissioners studied the two Records of Decision to see what points were definitely disapproved and found none. We realize that the Records of Decision were pathways. They were not exact blueprints and working out the details will take time."

The commissioners stated that they will continue to work with DOE and D&D contractor Fluor-BWXT "to ensure the necessary commitments to achieve the future site vision, most significantly with the consolidation of the existing plumes and landfills. While the Record of Decision language is not as strong as we would have preferred, DOE does appear to be moving forward with the actions necessary to achieve the future vision. We, as elected officials, and your board as advisors to DOE are privy to DOE's detailed cleanup plans well in advance of the actual field execution. We see our role as being watchdogs to see that DOE does not vary from its commitments."

“Your declaration that all the bulleted items need to be addressed before you can return support for the waste disposal facility seems shortsighted,” the commissioners’ letter continues. “Some issues are more complicated and time-consuming ... We commissioners have learned that patience is required when working on a project on the DOE site.”

The commissioners stated that they are concerned with some of the wording in the two Records of Decision but that they understand that those issues will continue as part of ongoing discussions between themselves and DOE.

“In your Recommendation section you make the statements that ‘DOE should recognize that the community expects these regulatory deficiencies to be addressed before any waste placements occur.’ It hardly seems likely that all of your bullet points are going to be addressed quickly,” the commissioners stated. “By your statement, you would expect the onsite waste disposal cell not to go into use.

“This would apparently slow some of the planned clean up activities. We have been very concerned about the failure of DOE to provide sufficient funding to carry out the cleanup. We are concerned that the same group in DOE that denied us sufficient funding will seize upon your reaction as an excuse to make further cuts, or to try to stop the cleanup effort altogether.”

Senate Dems to block energy bill as budget talks limp along

E&E News

October 8, 2015

[LINK](#)

Senate Democrats today are expected to filibuster the popular Energy and Water Development appropriations bill, as they continue to prod Republicans toward an end-of-the-year budget deal.

The upper chamber will vote today on cloture on the motion to proceed to the \$35.4 billion Energy-Water measure, H.R. 2028, which is generally one of the less controversial of the 12 appropriations bills.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), the ranking member on the Appropriations subcommittee that wrote the bill, said Democrats would oppose ending debate.

"That's the plan," she told E&E Daily yesterday. Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.), the vice chairman of the Democratic conference, also told E&E Daily yesterday that he expects Democrats to filibuster the bill -- a tactic the minority has employed for months in an effort to force Republicans into budget negotiations.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) set up today's vote as part of the back-and-forth tussling between the two parties over appropriations. By doing so, McConnell is daring Democrats to vote against a measure that Feinstein noted funds U.S. nuclear weapons programs, science programs at the Energy Department that enjoy broad bipartisan support, and the Army Corps of Engineers, which provides funds for water projects across the country.

Additionally, "they picked that bill because we have a relatively good allocation," Feinstein said, expressing deep frustration over the standoff over appropriations.

"What's happened is sort of a move away from the traditional way of appropriating, which has weakened the committee and provided no ability to get anything done, 'cause you're always just trying to stay even," she said. "It's very frustrating."

After months of prodding by Democrats, Schumer acknowledged that Republicans have started to discuss a budget deal to replace the continuing resolution that expires Dec. 11.

"They've been beginning to talk, but we've got to get serious," he told reporters. "We've got to come up with pay-fors so that we can avoid sequestration."

Rep. Nita Lowey (D-N.Y.), the ranking member on the House Appropriations Committee, said staff on the panel are already making plans for an omnibus spending measure they hope will replace automatic sequestration cuts.

Lowey told reporters the committee has an "aspirational" goal of receiving a topline number on Nov. 11, which would provide sufficient time to ready an omnibus for December.

"They're looking at certain items in the bill but after Nov. 11, and we get a number, then the hard work will continue to Dec. 11," Lowey said.

However, that effort is hamstrung by uncertainty over how much discretionary spending they'll have to work with -- an issue she indicated remains under discussion among congressional leaders and the White House.

Lowey said appropriators don't necessarily need a budget deal signed into law by Nov. 11 but need some certainty that the numbers they're given are supported by leaders in both parties. Further complicating matters is the question of what will happen after Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) steps down at the end of the month (see related story).

"I have no idea what's going to happen with their leadership," Lowey said. "I have no idea -- remember, 151 Republicans voted to shut down the government, and I would hope that wiser heads in the Republican Party can prevail and that they can work together, even though they may not agree on every number or every item. I'm hoping they can work together so I can work with the Republicans to come up with a plan."

Asked if negotiations may have to start again once there's new leadership in the House, she said it's possible. "Anything can happen," Lowey said.

Federal officials say MOX project no longer affordable

Greenville Online

October 8, 2015

[LINK](#)

WASHINGTON – The plutonium recycling facility under construction at Savannah River Site is no longer affordable, two top Energy Department officials told Congress Wednesday.

The controversial mixed-oxide fuel fabrication facility, also known as MOX, has been under scrutiny in Congress because of massive cost overruns. President Obama's administration now says a cheaper, faster alternative technology should be considered to dispose of 34 metric tons of excess weapons-grade plutonium.

"With the challenging and uncertain budget environment... we believe there is insufficient long-term funding available to support MOX," retired Air Force General Frank Klotz, administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration, told members of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Strategic Forces.

The administration said newer estimates for building and operating

MOX over several decades range from \$30 billion to \$50 billion, well beyond the \$3.8 billion originally predicted 15 years ago.

“If money were not an issue, MOX would be the straightforward way to go, but unfortunately money is an issue,” John MacWilliams, a senior adviser to Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz, told the subcommittee. Energy officials say MOX will cost about \$1 billion a year for several decades.

“That doesn’t seem to be in the scope of what’s practical,” MacWilliams said.

The administration’s preferred alternative to MOX involves diluting the plutonium and disposing of it at a facility in New Mexico. That would cost about \$400 million a year over several decades, which is close to what the government is spending on MOX. However, the New Mexico facility has been closed since an accident last year. It is scheduled to reopen next year, officials said.

MOX, which is designed to convert the plutonium into fuel for commercial nuclear reactors, has attracted several critics in Congress because of its escalating cost.

Rep. Jim Cooper, D-Tenn., said Congress should not be “in love with an older, worse and more expensive technology” and “force American taxpayers to double or triple their commitment.”

“Let’s kiss the old technology good-bye,” Cooper said.

South Carolina’s delegation continues to defend MOX, noting that it’s about 70 percent complete. Switching technologies would violate an agreement with South Carolina and would require renegotiating a plutonium disposition agreement with Russia, said Rep. Joe Wilson, R-Springdale.

“I sincerely hope we can proceed with MOX,” Wilson said. “The agreement with our state was to accept highly radioactive weapons grade plutonium, process it and move it out. That is the concern for the people that I represent.”

The administration witnesses said there would be efforts to protect Savannah River Site if the MOX project is abandoned.

“We would look for a new mission for the existing infrastructure,” MacWilliams said.

Savannah River Site MOX project debated in U.S. House hearing

Aiken Standard

October 7, 2015

[LINK](#)

A U.S. House Armed Services subcommittee grilled high-ranking Department of Energy officials who believe the MOX project is no longer financially viable.

The committee took testimony Wednesday from DOE leaders Frank Klotz, administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration, and Thomas Mason, the director of the Oak Ridge National Lab.

This summer, Mason led a group called the Red Team on a cost analysis study of MOX, which includes the Savannah River Site's Mixed Oxide Fuel Fabrication Facility, and its alternatives. The team concluded that the MOX method is too expensive and that a downblending approach would be more efficient.

The team supported earlier studies that state MOX would cost \$800M a year to be viable.

Rather than using multiple facilities to transform the 34 metric tons of weapons-grade plutonium into nuclear fuel, the downblending method would dilute the plutonium and dispose of it at a repository.

But U.S. Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C., a member of the subcommittee, took exception to the Red Team's conclusion.

Wilson stated Wednesday that MOX is nearly 70 percent complete and that the nation should stay the course.

He added that DOE made a deal with the state of South Carolina to complete MOX or remove 1 metric ton of plutonium from the state by the end of the year.

Without the successful completion of the MOX facility, the people of South Carolina will bear the burden of storing this material until an alternative is chosen," Wilson said.

Mason testified that downblending would be a challenge because the intended repository for the material would be New Mexico's Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, or WIPP. But the facility has been shut

down until further notice following safety and radiation incidents in February 2014.

In addition, WIPP's storage capacity is also a concern as the facility would not currently be able to store the material.

"Ensuring adequate WIPP capacity will require high-level, transparent and cooperative discussions with the state of New Mexico, but the Red Team believes that the constructive ongoing engagement with the state regarding WIPP restart bodes well for such discussions," Mason said.

But Rep. Jim Bridenstine, R-Okla., was not convinced that the Red Team's assessment, which states downblending would only cost \$400 million annually, is accurate since the timeline for WIPP has not been solidified.

Bridenstine said the Red Team did not seem to have evidence to reach its conclusion.

"We need the rundown to make sure we can actually do it," he said.

Critiques of the Red Team were countered by Rep. Jim Cooper, D-Tenn., who said Congress should not fund "an older, worse and more expensive technology."

DOE reported earlier this year that it would use the Red Team report and others to assess if the nation should move in a different direction.

Also on Wednesday, the U.S. Senate passed the defense bill which authorizes \$345 million for construction of the MOX facility. The House passed the same defense bill last week that funds construction of the Savannah River Site facility. The bill now heads to President Obama, who has already said he would veto the bill because of the additional \$38 billion it would provide for a war fund account.