

DOE offering gaseous diffusion plant tours

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For the first time in its more than 60-year history, the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant will be open for public tours, the U.S. Department of Energy announced Thursday.

Guided tours of the plant site, which will be coordinated by the Fluor Paducah Deactivation Project's public affairs office, will begin April 23 and continue once a month through September. All six tours will be held on Saturdays and take approximately three hours.

"We are pleased to be able to offer these tours so that members of the community, former workers, and visitors to the community can see the rich history that Paducah and the DOE have to offer," said Jennifer Woodard, DOE's Paducah site lead.

"The plant was one of only three gaseous diffusion plants built in the United States in the early 1950s to serve our country's defense and energy needs," Woodard said. "This tour program honors the legacy of dedicated workers who have passed through the security gates for decades to provide for our nation's needs."

The tours are free of charge. Each tour can accommodate up to 40 people. Attendees must be 18 or older and be U.S. citizens. No cameras, cell phones or other recording devices will be permitted. Pre-registration is required and participation is on a first-come, first-served basis. To register, go to www.ffspaducah.com.

Tours will begin at the West Kentucky Community and Technical College's Emerging Technology Center. Visitors who have pre-registered will be asked to arrive at 8 a.m. for a safety and security briefing, and to be issued badges required to enter the site.

Participants will board a bus to be taken to the site. While primarily a driving tour, participants will also be taken inside the plant control facility. The bus will return participants to WKCTC at approximately noon.

Tour dates (and registration deadlines) for the tours are April 23, (April 8); May 21, (May 13); June 25, (June 3); July 16, (July 1); Aug. 20, (Aug. 5); Sept. 17, (Sept. 2).

Bob Nichols, Fluor Paducah Deactivation Project director of operations, also spent four years at the Portsmouth (Ohio) Gaseous Diffusion Plant, which offered tours to the public.

"We found that the predominance of the folks that wanted to come and visit the site were employees from the past," Nichols said. "They wanted to see what had changed. Then, it branched out into people that were history buffs and wanted to know more about the lifecycle of the gaseous diffusion plants themselves and how they relate to the history of the United States."

According to Nichols, the tours are also an opportunity to inform "fence-line neighbors," those who live adjacent to the sites, about what is going on.

"The other dimension of this is as we go through environmental cleanup, there will be a lot of public comment pertaining to certain documentation," he said. "So, the more they (the public) know about the issues, the more educated they'll be in providing us public comment."