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New nuclear weapons facility moves ahead

by Joshua J. McElwee



From left, Presentation Sr. Mary Dennis Lentsch, Charles Moxley and Beth Rosdatter speak outside the federal courthouse in Knoxville, Tenn., March 4. Lentsch and Rosdatter were part of an antinuclear group arrested July 5, 2010, and testified at the pretrial hearing. Moxley, an adjunct professor of law at Fordham University, also testified. (Courtesy of Ralph Hutchison)

Construction of a major new nuclear weapons manufacturing facility passed a key hurdle March 4 with an official announcement by the Department of Energy that an environmental study on the impact of development at the Oak Ridge, Tenn., site has been completed.

The proposed hub, known as the Uranium Processing Facility, would be located at the Y-12 National Security Complex, which is responsible for the maintenance and production of the uranium components of every weapon in the U.S. arsenal.

It is one of three nuclear weapons sites where new projects are underway. A manufacturing complex for the nonnuclear parts of the U.S. arsenal is under construction in Kansas City, Mo., and a new plutonium facility at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico is also in the planning stages.

The report was first made public Feb 22. The official announcement came in the *Federal Register*.

News of the progress on the plans for the Oak Ridge site signifies a major step forward for U.S. nuclear weapons production and represents poor decision-making, antinuclear activists and analysts told *NCR*.



Taken together, the plans for the three facilities means the United States will have

each of the types of parts needed for increased nuclear weapons production, said Jay Coghlan, the executive director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico.

President Obama is rebuilding the production side of the nuclear weapons complex, said Coghlan. The U.S. is rebuilding the full spectrum for future nuclear weapons production.

Ralph Hutchison, coordinator for the Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance, a local group opposing the Tennessee facility's construction, said the facility's price tag -- up to \$6.5 billion according to government estimates -- reflects that the Department of Energy is making a terrible decision.

At a time when the rest of the nation is tightening its belt, Oak Ridge is out buying bigger trousers, he said.

The Y-12 complex has been in use since 1943 and is where the uranium used in the atomic bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, was enriched. According to the announcement, the new project would modernize operations and consolidate uranium production and maintenance from several buildings into an integrated manufacturing facility.

That modernization, one nuclear weapons analyst who has advised the Department of Energy told *NCR*, is vitally necessary.

Many of the current buildings that are used are truly -- on a world scale -- antiquated. They were built in the '50s or older, said David Overskei, former chair of the department's Nuclear Weapons Complex Infrastructure Task Force.

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Despite their differing opinions on the need for the new facility, Overskei, Hutchison and Coghlan all agreed on one thing in separate conversations with *NCR*: Its construction would come at an awkward time for the U.S. nuclear weapons complex.

Each of the analysts mentioned that many of the nation's nuclear weapons are being retrofitted under a process called the Life Extension Program, with the last of the updates scheduled to be started by 2021.

The new Oak Ridge facility isn't scheduled to be operational until 2024, Overskei said.

While the former government advisor said he would prefer to see the construction date of the plant moved up to fit with the current nuclear weapons update deadline, Coghlan said the timeline discrepancy emphasizes his belief that the new facility is unnecessary.

Said Coghlan: "We don't know when this factory will be constructed, if ever. If it's built it won't come online until substantially after the planned major refurbishments of existing nuclear weapons. So, it's not even clear what this facility will be missioned for by the time it would come online."

Official publication of the environmental statement gives those opposed to the project an opportunity to submit their objections before a final decision to move forward with construction is made, said Pam Gorman, an employee with the National Nuclear Security Administration and the environmental statement's document manager.

Although the report "doesn't necessarily mean the project will go forward," the National Nuclear Security Administration, which is managing the process, "expects to issue" a decision this year, sometime after a mandatory 30-day waiting process, she said.

Antinuclear activists are planning to use that period to look into litigation to stop the facility's construction, said Hutchison.

One issue they're particularly concerned about is how construction will affect the area's wetlands.

In order to address concerns about seismic stability at the new site, construction crews are planning a "massive excavation" of soil to fill the ground underneath the area with concrete for stability, Hutchison said. In order to remove the dirt from the site they're planning on building a road through nine wetland areas.

"They're going to destroy three wetlands and severely disrupt the other six," he said.

Activists, organized by Hutchison's Peace Alliance group, have already put together campaigns of civil disobedience to protest the plans for the new Oak Ridge facility. Fourteen were arrested July 5 when they walked onto the property of the current facility and read aloud a "declaration of independence from nuclear weapons."

A pretrial hearing for the group was held March 4 and a full trial is expected May 9.

Activists have plans for another action and conference event April 16, which Hutchison said will bring people across the country to Oak Ridge to "rally for peace" before committing civil disobedience.

Said Hutchison: "The April event will put some physical measurement on the level of opposition here. The number of people who come out ... may be a way to gauge whether or not there's universal support for the new bomb plant in Oak Ridge."

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