

Guilty verdict for action at planned nuke facility

Joshua J. McElwee | May. 24, 2011

Twelve members of a group who took part in a 2010 act of civil disobedience at the Y-12 National Security Complex outside Oak Ridge, Tenn., were found guilty of criminal trespass May 11.

The jury returned the verdict to U.S. Magistrate Judge Bruce Guyton after a three-day trial, which saw several of the activists take the stand to explain why they felt the need to protest at the site, which is responsible for the maintenance and construction of the uranium components of every nuclear weapon in the U.S. arsenal.

Construction of a major new nuclear weapons manufacturing facility at the complex is in the final planning stages. Development cleared a key hurdle March 4 with the release of an environmental study by the Department of Energy (*NCR*, March 18).

A sentencing date for the 12 has not been scheduled. They face up to a year in prison.

The activists' July 5, 2010, action came at the end of a 200-strong peace rally outside the gates of the complex. After a prayer vigil, the 12 climbed over a barbed wire fence onto the property and were arrested, said Ralph Hutchison, the coordinator for the Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance, a local group opposing the new Tennessee facility's construction.

Twenty-three others were arrested for blocking the road to the complex and were subsequently found guilty on state charges, said Hutchison. Three of them served varying times in jail -- up to two weeks -- with the rest receiving fines.

In the group found guilty May 11 were Jesuit Fr. Bill Bichsel of Tacoma, Wash.; Presentation Sr. Mary Dennis Lentsch of Washburn, Tenn.; and Catholic Workers Steve Baggerly of Norfolk, Va., and Mike Walli of Duluth, Minn.

At the time of the trial for the Oak Ridge Action, Bichsel was already in custody for a 2009 act of civil disobedience at the U.S. Navy nuclear weapons base in Bangor, Wash., for which he had been sentenced to three months in prison (*NCR*, April 15).

Seven others in the Oak Ridge group were taken into local custody after the trial because they would not accept supervised release until sentencing.

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