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Plant construction falls behind

PIKETON
 By JEFF BARRON, PDT Staff Writer
 Feds say DUF6 project lags 12 to 14 months

Construction on a building to convert nuclear waste to a more stable form at the Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion Plant is 12 to 14 months behind schedule, a Department of Energy official said on Thursday.

Portsmouth/Paducah Project Manager Bill Murphie said the delay came because Uranium Disposition Services was late in submitting design plans to the DOE for final approval.

UDS will use the building to convert depleted uranium hexafluoride (DUF6) into uranium oxide for disposal or reuse. Hundreds of cylinders of DUF6 sit in a yard at the plant, including those shipped from Oak Ridge, Tenn.

"It (delay) is becoming a sore point with the department," Murphie said at a DOE public meeting at the Ohio State University Endeavor Center. "Some of it is UDS' fault, some of it is the department's fault, and some of it is beyond anyone's control." He cited weather problems, soil problems and issues with other contractors as uncontrollable delays.

However, Murphie said the DOE could approve the plans in the next few weeks. The DOE will continue to monitor the process once the design is approved, he said.

"DOE will be looking over their shoulder to make sure the construction (timetable) is not like the design phase," Murphie said. "The past will not be a reflection of the future."

Murphie also talked about accomplishments of the past six months at the diffusion plant, including:

- Completing the removal of 8,100 tons of scrap metal. Murphie said that is more metal than is in the Eiffel Tower.
- Shipped 1,920 containers of nuclear waste for off-site disposal.
- Completed the shipment of 368 containers from the cleanup of the enrichment plant.
- Received Ohio Environmental Protection Agency approval for groundwater treatment in one section of the site.

The DOE has operated the plant on cold standby status for almost five years. That means the plant has been kept in a state of readiness to enrich uranium should the need arise.

But cold standby will end Sept. 30. The DOE will then begin the decontamination and decommission process.

The DOE owns the plant and leases it to the United States Enrichment Corp. USEC plans to begin a new way of enriching uranium by the end of the decade. The DOE will decommission areas of the plant that USEC will not use.

Murphie said the decommission process will mean the addition of jobs.

"I don't want to be accused of saying there won't be a change," he said. "You have skill mixes and crafts that have to change. But in terms of total employment, we're on a downward curve now within the program. But I think this will be an opportunity for us to see some employment go back up."

Plans for the decommission are still being worked out by the DOE, Murphie said.

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