

UPF UPDATE

MAY 2016

SAFETY BE DAMNED—FULL SPEED AHEAD!

AFTER CONDUCTING A MORE-THAN-YEAR-LONG REVIEW of its 2011 Site-Wide Environmental Impact Statement for the Y-12 nuclear weapons complex, the National Nuclear Security Administration has concluded no further environmental analysis is required, and Bechtel can move forward with construction of the Uranium Processing Facility bomb plant.

Concerns about the environment, worker and public safety are answered in one word: Meh.

The old plan—one new building to house all enriched uranium operations—is now seven buildings, five new and two old. Meh. The two old buildings, which will handle enriched uranium, will not be upgraded to meet current seismic standards because the cost is “prohibitive.” Meh. The US Geological Survey has raised the earthquake risk for the East Tennessee Seismic Zone significantly. Meh. Researchers at the University of Tennessee have documented larger earthquakes than previously known (magnitude 6.0 or higher). Meh.

Instead of undertaking a serious analysis of the catastrophic effects of a 6.0 magnitude earthquake as would be required in a new Site-Wide EIS, NNSA has decided instead to declare the previous analysis “valid and relevant” and thus not repeated in the Supplement Analysis.

NOT THE ONLY PROBLEM

The risks posed by earthquakes are hypothetical until an earthquake strikes. Other environmental risks are no longer suitable for the subjunctive case. In commenting on the original Site-Wide EIS in 2010, the Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance warned that any disturbance of soils on the Y-12 site could be expected to uncover contamination from past operations. NNSA dismissed the concerns saying it would do some soil characterization before digging.



It didn't take long for OREPA's caution to prove well-founded. The first stage in site preparation was the construction of a haul road to transport excavated soil away from the building site and concrete to the building site. Workers constructing the haul road soon uncovered a debris field, fourteen feet beneath the surface, which contained radioactive waste. OREPA's questions about worker exposure and protections against contamination have gone unanswered.

And it turns out the debris field was not a one-time thing. In a recent article describing another “surprise” encounter with contamination, the *Knoxville News-Sentinel's* Frank Munger reported there have been fifty (50!) similar incidents during excavation.

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THE UPF

- Proposed in 2005 as a replacement for aging enriched uranium facilities at Y-12 in Oak Ridge, TN.
- Originally planned to modernize dismantlement operations; 2016 plan calls for new production facilities only. Other operations will continue in unsafe, deteriorating buildings for decades.
- Remains the flagship of the next generation of nuclear weapons production facilities in the US.

LIFE EXTENSION PROGRAMS

- To refurbish and replace aging parts of weapons in the US nuclear stockpile to extend their useful life for 60-120 years.
- Some modifications change the military capabilities of the warhead being “LEPPed,” effectively creating a new nuclear weapon.
- In 2016, the US is performing LEPs on the W-76 trident warhead; plans for B61 LEPs are undergoing scrutiny; initial studies on W78 LEPs are also beginning.

To many rational people this turn of events might suggest it would be worth hitting the pause button to more carefully assess the hazards to workers. But to the NNSA? Meh. Work proceeds apace.

WORKER AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Long-time followers of the UPF project know there is no longer a valid cost estimate for the project. OREPA predicts the modernization of Y-12 will cost well over \$15 billion. Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander continues to claim, implausibly, the UPF will be built for \$6.5 billion—this despite the fact that this year’s budget adds \$575 million to the tab, bringing the total so far, on design alone, to more than \$3 billion.

The dollar numbers are bad enough. But the greater cost of the UPF may be counted in the sacrifice of worker and public health and

safety. Insisting on continued weapon production activities at Y-12 despite the lack of seismic qualification of production facilities makes one thing clear: the health and safety of workers and the public are subservient to the drive to make bomb parts, and to line the corporate pockets of Bechtel and Lockheed Martin.

SAME OLD STORY

The massive investment in production facilities which will serve no purpose unless the United States embarks on a full-scale modernization of all nuclear warheads and bombs comes at a price—no money for cleanup.

The East Fork Poplar Creek which drains the east end of Y-12 continues to leach mercury into the public waterways with every rainfall. The government has been aware of the mercury contamination since 1983, and has spent more than a billion dollars clean-

ing up flood plains and downstream areas, but mercury releases from Y-12 continue.

There are two reasons: One, money is not available for cleanup because it is being spent on production activities. Two, continuing production activities at Y-12 requires high security, making cleanup of facilities inside the security footprint expensive or impossible.

Even buildings that have been deemed an “increasing risk to workers and the public”—the Alpha-5 building at Y-12 was at the top of the DOE Inspector General’s list of “high risk excess facilities”—are left to continue to threaten the environment, workers and the public because Senator Alexander claims poverty when it comes to protecting worker and public health and safety even as he doles out hundreds of millions to Bechtel to build a new bomb plant.

You can support the UPF Accountability Project with a tax-deductible donation to:
Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance, P O Box 5743, Oak Ridge, TN 37831
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