Papering over safety problems at the nuclear bomb plant
It’s official! OREPA joins ICAN

In June of 2016, the Board of the Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance voted to join the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. Due to clerical negligence on the part of our Coordinator, though, we didn’t get our paperwork in until this summer.

In early September, we received word back, and the news was good—we are officially welcomed to the campaign as members of ICAN. It doesn’t much change what we are doing—we were already campaign supporters, working in partnership with a number of international organizations, and taking part in ICAN organized activities at the United Nations. But it will be useful in days to come as we continue to work to develop stronger relationships internationally.

Ultimately, ICAN members in the United States will need to be the source of pressure on our government to join the Ban Treaty, and OREPA is committed to being part of that effort.

Support for Ban Treaty continues to grow

The Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons officially opened for signatures in September 2017. In order to enter into force, the Treaty requires 50 states to sign and ratify the treaty. On the day it opened for signature it surpassed the 50 signature mark.

Since then, parliaments, congresses, and state bodies have been discussing the Treaty, each according to their own process.

The United States of America has been consistent in boycotting everything having to do with the treaty and working hard to prevent any allies from taking steps to support the treaty. Other nuclear weapons states have likewise taken a stand-aside posture.

But the Treaty continues to garner support and move closer to entry-into-force. As of October 3, 69 states have signed the Treaty, and 19 states have completed their ratification processes.

The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, recipients of the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize, continues to work to develop support around the globe for the Treaty. You can track their work and the progress of the Ban Treaty at icanw.org.

1,000 Cranes for peace

For the third year, OREPA partnered with the Smoky Mountain Chapter of CISV (formerly Children’s International Summer Villages) to celebrate International Peace Day on September 22 with 1,000 Cranes, a community event that aimed to fold a thousand paper cranes in one day.

Union Avenue Bookstore in downtown Knoxville was our gracious host, and we spread tables along the sidewalk under the awning and we folded, and taught, and folded, and talked, and folded, and folded.

As we were setting up, the proprietor of the coffee shop next door came out and offered us the use of her outdoor tables and chairs. “This is great,” she said, smiling. “Can I get you a coffee?”

During the course of the day passersby stopped to check out the activity; we taught dozens of people how to fold cranes. Three college students stopped to fold just one crane, then asked for more paper and, for the next two and a half hours, folded peace cranes.

In the end, we folded more than 700 cranes, most of which will be given out at tabling events and presentations by OREPA and CISV during the coming year. This year, we had special T-shirts for anyone folding 30 cranes or more—eight people claimed shirts.

1,000 Cranes not only gives us a chance to pause and reflect on International Peace Day, it is a chance to raise the profile of peace in our community.
When it comes to safety, our problems are your problems

When money gets tight, priorities become clear: building nuclear bombs comes first, and protecting workers and the public comes—well, never, actually.

The buildings are beyond “in need of repair.” At a meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 2001, the manager of the Y-12 Nuclear Weapons Complex in Oak Ridge said it was operating in “run-to-failure” mode and predicted the latest it could safely operate was 2016.

As they made plans to replace the old buildings—amid reports of chunks of reinforced concrete as large as a sheet of plywood falling from the ceiling—they decided to suspend significant maintenance operations. Why invest in the failing dinosaurs when they were about to be abandoned?

Fast forward to 2018, thirteen years after the announcement of the plan to replace the old buildings with a state-of-the-art Uranium Processing Facility to consolidate enriched uranium operations in a new, cleaner, safer, seismically qualified building. And six years after the “space/fit” issue that derailed the original UPF plan. And five years after the soaring price estimates, more than ten times higher than the original cost prediction, forced a retrenchment. And four years after the Red Team report abandoned the “Big Box” concept and issued a recommendation for the enriched uranium program.

That report brought us to now, when NNSA plans to continue dangerous operations with weapons grade highly enriched uranium in two facilities—Buildings 9215 and 9204-2E—that do not meet current environmental standards and will likely not withstand a moderate earthquake. For twenty more years.

Supplement Analysis presents plan

According to the latest Supplement Analysis, released in August, the National Nuclear Security Administration has come up with a plan to respond to the structural deficiencies in the buildings.

Rather than retrofit the buildings to make them compliant (NNSA says it would cost too much, some engineers say it would be impossible at any price), they have decided to try to cover the buildings with paperwork, sheets and sheets of optimistic and self-justifying twenty-pound copy paper, stuck to the rusting hulk of the buildings’ exterior with an epoxy made of high hopes and best wishes, applied with crossed fingers.

Seriously, that’s about it.

What they don’t have to do

It came as no surprise when the NNNA released the final version of its 2018 SA and declared itself fully covered under the National Environmental Policy Act. The SA found:

• No need to prepare a new Site-Wide Environmental Impact Statement or even to prepare a Supplement.
• Good to go on the Uranium Processing Facility bomb plant even though the most recent earthquake hazard data wasn’t used in the planning.
• Good to go on the old out-of-compliance buildings though they have yet to begin an thorough analysis of the structural deficiencies of the buildings and their performance in an earthquake, and
• Good to go on all the other bomb building operations.
• Also, no worries on the abandoned, contaminated, high-risk buildings that won’t be taken down in at least the next five years despite the Department of Energy’s Inspector General’s Office finding that they present an “ever-increasing risk” to workers and the public.

Can they get away with it?

The secret behind this remarkably sanguine
assessments is a policy hidden deep within the pages of the Supplement Analysis. Whereas previously risks to workers and the public, especially in the deteriorating old buildings at Y-12, were to be addressed by moving dangerous materials out of the buildings and providing additional worker protections, including hard hats (in case of building collapse), the latest plan adds a new feature: Risk Acceptance.

That’s right—some risks we’re just accepting. And when I say “we” I mean everyone. Workers, and people who live near the plant, and people who live within a fifty mile radius, and people who depend on the NNSA to keep track of and control special nuclear materials—all of us are just going to have to accept the risks that NNSA has determined are necessary.

You might wonder what those risks levels are, especially if you live in Oak Ridge, Knoxville, or points downwind from Oak Ridge, places where wind might blow or water might carry minute specks of highly enriched uranium dust released into the atmosphere in the collapse of a huge building.

If you know the history of Oak Ridge, including the failure to inform the public for decades of the release of millions of pounds of mercury into local waters or the intentional release of radioactive materials into the air to test monitoring equipment, you might feel the NNSA has a particular obligation to engage the public in a process that would explain risk levels, answer questions, and perhaps even get some version of consent from the public.

Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! If that kind of thinking makes sense to you, get real. NNSA’s policy of Risk Acceptance has been imposed without the slightest whiff of information being presented to the public. No document in the reading room, no public hearing or information session, no mailing to Oak Ridge residents—just a decision that a community that accepts a couple billion dollars a year to make nuclear bomb parts for the federal government has no right to ask what else they are getting for their money, and the federal government that is exposing them to nonconsensual risks has no responsibility to inform them.

Lawsuit expands

The SA process was unusual in that the NNSA, for the first time ever, provided a brief window for public comment. This allowed OREPA to raise significant issues that would not only warrant attention now, but would also become part of the Administrative Record. The Administrative Record is the collection of documents and data that Federal Judge Pamela Reeves will use to decide the case being brought by OREPA and others challenging the UPF bomb plant.

It also provided us with additional information that prompted us to prepare an amended complaint—basically, our original complaint bolstered by additional materials. We were able to incorporate expert testimony on the deficiencies in the government’s seismic analysis as well as corroborating testimony from a former DOE Assistant Secretary.

The government and our legal team have agreed upon a schedule that, in the best possible circumstance, will have us filing our final papers on May 3, 2019. That date can shift, of course. And after that, it is in the hands of Judge Reeves.

OREPA is grateful to everyone who was able to respond to our special appeal for funding to cover the cost of expert witnesses—we needed to raise $10,000 on very short notice. That’s a lot of money for in OREPA’s world, and the response showed that a lot of us own this lawsuit.

Going forward, we are constrained by the court’s process and schedule—there is a lot of back and forth between the Justice Department and our legal team before we actually get into court. But we are moving.

In the meantime, we continue to address the significant problems at the bomb plant with demonstrations, pressure on Congress, and direct contact with decision-makers in Washington, DC.

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Safety Board’s work at risk under new DOE Order

The Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board is one of the few remaining checks on the Department of Energy—and DOE is working hard to strip the Board of its power. Citizens are pushing

The flow of information about activities on DOE’s nuclear weapons sites across the country is, well, to call it a trickle would be generous. Apart from infrequent press releases touting something the Department of Energy or National Nuclear Security Administration considers a success, we hear nothing from the government.

Up until a few years ago, we had strong, regular coverage of activities on the Oak Ridge Reservation by local media. But a retirement and staff cuts at the Knoxville News-Sentinel eliminated the beat altogether. Even though the federal government will spend more than $3 billion in Oak Ridge this year, there is less than one article or report a month in the local media. The government acts with impunity. (This is one reason our demand for compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act is important—Environmental Impact Statements are one of the few places we can learn what is taking place and what is planned.)

Which makes the work of the Defense Nuclear Facilities Board all the more critical. The DNFSB, established by Congress nearly 30 years ago, is charged with looking over the DOE and NNSA’s shoulders and informing Congress and the Secretary of Energy about what they see.

Their mandate is limited—only facilities determined to be defense nuclear facilities, and only safety issues. The Board and the staff have technical backgrounds appropriate to their work. They have no enforcement authority; their power is limited to making recommendations. And they are a shining example of the kind of transparency the public deserves in a democracy. The Safety Board publishes almost everything on its web site. Weekly reports from the sites where they have on-site Resident Inspectors, issue reports, transcripts of hearings, even notes from internal Board meetings.

So when we learned that DOE had issued a new Order, DOE Order 140.1, that would limit who the Safety Board could talk to, requiring upper management approval before a worker could answer questions; declare many facilities off limits (everything below Category 3 nuclear facilities); and take worker safety issues off the table, allowing recommendations only on issues likely to impact the off-site public—well, it was time to act.

OREPA joined with our colleagues across the weapons complex in the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability to craft a strategy to push back against DOE Order 140.1 and to support the work of the Safety Board. When DNFSB announced a hearing in late August, we collaborated with our ANA friends to prepare a media statement, a letter to Secretary of Energy Perry, and a Fact Sheet. Kathy Crandall Robinson attended the hearing for ANA and TriValley CAREs (in Livermore, CA) and delivered a statement. And OREPA submitted extensive written comments for the record.

We also were able to reach out to OREPA folks in middle Tennessee who contacted the staff of Representative Jim Cooper, ranking member on the House Armed Service Strategic Forces committee (Great work, you guys!). Cooper’s staff thanked us for alerting them to this and subsequently co-authored a letter challenging the Department of Energy’s planned changes.

As we go to press, we expect the Safety Board to hold at least one more hearing, though no date has been released. You can track the work of the Safety Board at dnfsb.gov.
Remembering Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Oak Ridge

left: August 4, practicing the banner hang; Eric Johnson delivers an update on the Kings Bar Plowshares action; Catalystica Players present *The Three Pigleteers: an Orwellian Fable*; On the march to Y12 — the water girls await the marchers. Top: Guy Larry Osborne reads at the Names and Remembrance Ceremony on August 6; Cranes being tied to the fence. Right and below: Jeff Brooks and Kathie Shiba lead Litany of Hope at Peace Lantern Ceremony on August 9; the gathering joins in the litany. Bottom: Yellow X banner at the Y12 bomb plant, August 4.