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THE BLEAK FUTURE FOR PLUTONIUM OPERATIONS AT THE SAVANNAH RIVER SITE

AN END TO PLUTONIUM RECYCLING?

by Tom Clements and Jason Salzman

August 29, 1991

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Department of Energy's Savannah River Site (SRS) has produced and processed plutonium since it was opened in the early 1950s. Production of weapons-grade plutonium, plutonium-239, in the SRS reactors has ceased, but processing of plutonium for use in nuclear weapons has continued. Processing, which involves recovery of plutonium from residues, scrap and returned warheads, has provided purified plutonium metal for warhead production at the Rocky Flats Plant in Colorado.

In an effort to upgrade capacity, reliability and safety, a new plutonium facility - the New Special Recovery Facility (NSRF) - has been built at SRS at a cost of at least \$86 million. An Environmental Assessment is currently being prepared on the NSRF, and DOE hopes to begin operation this year. Without public discussion, the mission of the NSRF appears to have evolved to replace some of the operations formerly conducted at Rocky Flats.

Although DOE is pushing to begin operation of the NSRF, the "need" for its operation has been placed in doubt due to legislation currently moving through Congress and due to DOE's own research. Reuse of plutonium "triggers" or "pits" from warheads, without reprocessing in the New Special Recovery Facility or any other facility, could render startup and operation completely unnecessary.

Greenpeace calls for the startup of the New Special Recovery Facility to be canceled until the feasibility of reusing plutonium triggers has been fully investigated.

WHERE DOES PLUTONIUM MANUFACTURE TAKE PLACE?

The Department of Energy nuclear weapons production complex involves over 20 sites around the country, covering about 3000 square miles. Plutonium, which is artificially created in nuclear reactors and is the main nuclear component of nuclear warheads, has been produced at only two DOE sites - the Savannah River Site in South Carolina and the Hanford Reservation in Washington. Production of new supplies of weapons-grade plutonium, plutonium-239, was recently terminated and will not be renewed. All future nuclear weapons will be made from existing, recycled plutonium from old warheads. (U.S. Department of Energy, Nuclear Weapons Complex Reconfiguration Study, January, 1991, at 65.)

PLUTONIUM RECYCLING

Even while new plutonium was being created in its nuclear reactors, DOE routinely recycled plutonium for use in new warheads. As part of the plutonium recycling process, DOE purifies and concentrates the material in large facilities using acid solutions and incineration.

DOE purifies and re-uses plutonium from:

- o Old warheads. Most plutonium for recycling and subsequent use in new warheads has been extracted from retired warheads that have been withdrawn from the nuclear arsenal. These warheads are often called "site returns." Due to on-going unilateral nuclear weapons retirement and reductions due to arms control treaties, DOE has stated that all plutonium for new warheads could come from this source. (Reconfiguration Study at 159.)

- o Plutonium scrap. During the manufacture of plutonium components for warheads, shavings are produced, plutonium is absorbed into crucibles, containers and other equipment, and plutonium is miscast; all are considered scrap. This scrap material can be processed purified and used to produce new warheads. (Any material containing recyclable plutonium is sometimes called a "residue.")

DOE has facilities capable of recycling plutonium at the Savannah River Site, the Rocky Flats Plant in Colorado, the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, and the Hanford Reservation in Washington state.

ROLE OF SRS IN PLUTONIUM RECYCLING

The F-Canyon at the Savannah River Site is where plutonium processing operations are conducted. This aging facility, according to the SRS's Nuclear Weapons Complex Reconfiguration Site Proposal, currently is involved in the "chemical recovery of weapons-grade plutonium from residues and returned warheads in support of Rocky Flats Plant's mission."

ROLE OF ROCKY FLATS IN PLUTONIUM PROCESSING

Located just 16 miles from Denver, Colorado, the Rocky Flats Plant was constructed in 1952 to produce plutonium triggers for nuclear warheads. A trigger, commonly called the warhead "pit," is essentially a small fission bomb that is placed in a warhead to ignite a large fusion explosion.

DOE has manufactured triggers in Building 707 at Rocky Flats. This facility can be described as a large metal workshop, in which plutonium in ingot form is fashioned into shapes for triggers.

Facilities at Rocky Flats also purify plutonium, which is then used for the manufacture of triggers.

Rocky Flats also produces weapons components comprised of depleted uranium, stainless steel, beryllium, and other metals.

All plutonium operations at Rocky Flats have been shut down since November, 1989, due to safety problems. After a series of restart postponements, DOE is pushing for restart of a plutonium laboratory building this fall.

DOE PLANS TO BEGIN OPERATING A NEW PLUTONIUM RECYCLING FACILITY AT THE SAVANNAH RIVER SITE

As part of its efforts to "reconfigure" the nuclear weapons complex, DOE plans to construct a new plutonium recycling facility at a still undetermined location. In addition, DOE intends to build a new facility to produce plutonium triggers, as it has been decided that Rocky Flats will be closed as a production facility. Until a new recycling facility is constructed, according to DOE, SRS has the "capacity" to be the "principal supplier" of recycled plutonium. (Reconfiguration Study at 158-159.)

SRS is a prime candidate to receive all of the Rocky Flats plutonium operations. Other sites under consideration include Pantex in Amarillo, Texas, Oak Ridge in Tennessee, and the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory.

A key element of Savannah River's plutonium recycling capacity appears to be the \$86 million New Special Recovery facility. DOE began construction of this facility in 1983 and has plans to begin its operation sometime in 1991. The last scheduled startup date was June, 1991.

The New Special Recovery Facility, according to the DOE's Action Description Memorandum of June 15, 1990, "will receive, assay, and process special plutonium metal and oxide feedstocks in various forms." The processed plutonium, in a liquid form, would be fed back into existing processing facilities in the F-Canyon for fabrication into purified metal ingots.

Original plans for the operation of the New Special Recovery Facility has changed in order to allow "site returns" to be processed. The DOE Fiscal Year 1992/Fiscal Year 1993 Congressional Budget Request for Atomic Energy Defense Activities - Material Production states: "Modifications are also being made in the New Special Recovery Facility to allow processing of site returns of weapons systems."

Currently, an Environmental Assessment (EA) is being prepared by DOE on the operation of the New Special Recovery Facility. The EA may be released to the public as soon as September, but its release has been postponed several times in the past and may well be delayed again.

It is not known if DOE will allow a comment period on the EA or if a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) will be issued, with operations anticipated immediately thereafter.

AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT MAY BE CALLED FOR

DOE's determination that an Environmental Assessment is a sufficient analysis of the environmental impacts of the New Special Recovery Facility has been called into question. An Environmental Impact Statement may well have to be conducted once more is known about the full purpose of the facility and its environmental impacts. Its safety has also not been demonstrated.

There are indications that the New Special Recovery Facility has indeed been built or modified to replace some operations of the Rocky Flats Plant. The two-story, 400,000-cubic-foot structure (which sits atop the F-Canyon), would be capable of duplicating the recycling operations of Rocky Flats. (Keith Schneider, "New Atom Plant Being Tested in South Carolina," New York Times, Nov. 10, 1990, at 1.)

This facility's extensive plutonium recycling capabilities may well serve as a partial replacement for Rocky Flats. As Rocky Flats may never operate again, special attention must be made to the role of the New Special Recovery Facility.

Further, the New Special Recovery Facility should clearly be incorporated into the current Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement now being conducted on DOE's proposed reconfiguration -- particularly because NSRF is being designed or modified to replace operations which have been conducted at Rocky Flats.

DOE SHOULD NEVER OPERATE THE NEW SPECIAL RECOVERY FACILITY

It is hard to conceive of a more incongruous historical moment to begin operating a new nuclear bomb plant at Savannah River. President Bush has declared the Cold War over, the Warsaw Pact has dissolved, and all remaining vestiges of the Soviet Union as an enemy have clearly fallen away with the failure of the August 19 coup.

The United States and the Soviet Union are verifiably dismantling nuclear weapons, and further cuts in the nuclear stockpiles are likely.

Even though the U.S. budget remains deep in the red and the government has no permanent storage or disposal facility for the waste generated during nuclear bomb production at Rocky Flats or Savannah River, DOE is rushing ahead to operate this new bomb factory.

It is indeed shameful, given current affairs, for startup and operation of the New Special Recovery Facility to proceed.

THE REUSE OF WARHEAD PITS COULD ELIMINATE ANY "NEED" FOR THE NEW SPECIAL RECOVERY FACILITY

Even if the DOE determines that the New Special Recovery Facility is safe, the plant still may not be "needed," even from DOE's point of view. This is because recent DOE research indicates that instead of manufacturing new plutonium pits for warheads, DOE may well be able to reuse pits from retired warheads. If this is indeed possible, then DOE would have no "need" to recycle plutonium for new pits. Plutonium recycling would become redundant for weapons production. (R. Jeffrey Smith, "Ultimate Recycling: Nuclear Warheads," Science, Vol. 252, 24 May 1991, at 1057).

Initial studies of pit reuse indicate that it is feasible. A nuclear test conducted with a warhead containing a pit from a retired warhead "exceeded" the expectations of scientists at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, according to congressional testimony of Livermore Director John H. Nuckolls. (Smith, at 1057.)

Nuckolls told the Washington Post that a version of the W88 warhead for the Trident II missile could be developed using existing pits - which will be flooding back to the U.S. from weapons retired under START. The first plutonium triggers to be produced if Rocky Flats were to reopen pit production would most likely be used in the W88 warheads for the Trident II missile. Kings Bay, the east coast base of the Trident submarine, is located in St. Marys, Georgia. (R. Jeffrey Smith and Thomas W. Lippman, "U.S. Rushes to Reopen Nuclear Weapons Plant," Washington Post, May 1, 1991, at 1.)

Pit reuse has another advantage. A DOE study has concluded that it would likely subject workers in the weapons plants to less radiation exposure than the fabrication process at Rocky Flats. This is because there will be less plutonium "handling time" involved.

While Greenpeace does not support the continued production of nuclear weapons under any circumstances, we advocate that if any such production does occur, that safety, health protection, and the environment be the number one priority.

DOE states: "Studies are being conducted to evaluate the impact of increased radiation on workers for the various pit reuse options. Older pits have higher intrinsic radiation due to the build-up of americium, a decay product of plutonium; however, reasonable steps can be taken to minimize this increased radiation. It is estimated that shielding of 3/8 inches of lead will provide adequate protection from the americium build-up. Even though there are higher intrinsic radiation levels with reused pits, it is believed that overall worker exposure will be less because there will be less 'handling time' involved in the fabrication process. Detailed evaluations remain to be completed." (Hearing Transcript, House of Representatives, Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development for FY 1992, Part 6, at 609.)

AMENDMENT PASSED BY THE SENATE WOULD FORCE DOE TO STUDY PIT REUSE IN MORE DEPTH

The Senate version of the FY 1992 Defense Authorization Bill, which recently passed the Senate, contains an amendment - introduced by Senator Tim Worth (D-CO) - directing the Defense Science Board, in conjunction with the Nuclear Weapons Council, to prepare a report containing analyses of 1) the feasibility of reusing existing pits in each warhead type schedule for production at Rocky Flats; 2) the approximate date that manufacture of each warhead type using an existing pit could begin; 3) a description of any modifications necessary to reuse plutonium pits and where such modification would be made; 4) a description of performance losses, if any, caused by reuse of existing plutonium pits; 5) if appropriate, a certification by the Secretary of Energy and the Secretary of Defense that operation of the Rocky Flats facility is necessary to meet national security needs.

Pursuant to the Senate bill, DOE must complete these reports prior to restart of plutonium pit fabrication at the Rocky Flats Plant in Colorado.

A similar amendment regarding pit reuse was not included in the House version of the Defense Authorization Bill. Therefore, a conference committee of members of the House and Senate Armed Services Committees will meet in September to decide whether language calling for studies of pit reuse will be included in the final bill.

Even if pit reuse language does not pass the entire Congress, DOE will likely continue research into pit reuse possibilities.

NEW SPECIAL RECOVERY FACILITY SHOULD NOT BE OPERATED UNTIL REPORTS ON PIT REUSE ARE COMPLETED

Given that pit reuse could eliminate the "need" for plutonium recycling, including operations of the New Special Recovery Facility and associated operations at the F-Canyon, the

Department of Energy should not start up the NSRF until a series of reports, like those outlined in the Senate version of the Defense Authorization Bill, are complete.

The reason for this is obvious: why start up any facility that poses intrinsic dangers until it is clear that the facility will be needed?

The case for delaying NSRF operation is made even stronger by the Senate's stipulation that Rocky Flats not restart until the feasibility of reusing pits is assessed. The NSRF would perform some of Rocky Flats' plutonium operations, replacing the work of facilities at Rocky Flats that are old and unsafe. If reports determine that plutonium recycling need not take place at Rocky Flats, these operations need not take place anywhere.

If language on pit reuse does not pass the Congress, prudence should dictate that DOE should postpone operation of both the New Special Recovery Facility and plutonium recycling operations at Rocky Flats until a thorough pit reuse analysis has been completed.

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FACT SHEET NEW SPECIAL RECOVERY FACILITY

BACKGROUND

The New Special Recovery Facility (NSR) was a FY 1982 line-item construction project. NSR was designed and built to replace existing special recovery facilities which have reached the stage of technological obsolescence and inadequate operational availability. This "old" special recovery facility (constructed circa 1960) does not provide the level of radiological shielding consistent with DOE's As-Low-As-Reasonably-Achievable (ALARA) protection criteria, nor does it incorporate state-of-the-art technology for radiological control and process equipment. Total project cost was \$85.8 million, which included the addition of a new plutonium storage facility (PSF) to the scope of the project in 1985 (\$18 million). The PSF was built to support the NSR and the F Area facilities.

PURPOSE

One of the primary missions of the Savannah River Site (SRS) has always been to provide specification plutonium metal for DOE's nuclear weapons production activities. This material has historically been provided from the extraction of plutonium from production reactor targets, the recycle of impure metal, and from the recovery of plutonium residues. Plutonium residues are generated during the extraction and finishing steps (conversion to solid metal form), from the fabrication of weapon components, and from the recovery processes themselves. SRS is one of a few DOE sites with the capability to process and recover plutonium. The others include the Rocky Flats Plant in Colorado, the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, and the Hanford Reservation in Washington. Neither site entirely duplicates another; each complements the other to complete the efficient recycle of plutonium. The recycling of plutonium containing residues and obsolete weapon components has permitted the cessation of the production of new plutonium in the Savannah River reactors for an indefinite period.

The New Special Recovery facility provides SRS, and DOE, with a new, up-to-date capability to continue the mission of the recovery of plutonium from solid plutonium residues. NSR is a facility with the primary function of dissolving these materials (with acid) into liquid. If required of the resulting solution, it provides a limited purification capability before the solutions are transferred to other Building 221-F process facilities (F Canyon and FB Line). Ultimately, the plutonium-bearing liquid is converted back to a purified solid in FB Line.

DESCRIPTION

The New Special Recovery facility consists of essentially two identical process lines constructed in glovebox cabinet-type enclosures, chemical preparation and makeup equipment, ventilation and contamination control equipment, and office space. Material for recovery is charged to a dissolver where it is contacted with acid. Adjustments to the solution are made as

necessary (to control pH, concentration). Dependent on the level and content of contaminants/impurities the solution may pass through an anion exchange purification process before being transferred to the F Canyon where it may undergo further purification before being transferred to the FB Line for conversion to a purified solid (metal). To meet program requirements the NSR requires modification to some process equipment (chemical preparation, feed preparation, dissolvers) to increase its operational capacity. This provides additional processing flexibility at SRS. The output capacity of SRS plutonium product facilities (FB Line metal production) is not being increased.

NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (NEPA)

The construction, modification, and operation of NSR is expected to provide significant worker and public health and safety, and environmental improvements over the continued operation of the existing obsolete recovery facilities. Initial NEPA documentation to address the construction and operation of NSR was completed in accordance with the Council of Environmental Quality and DOE NEPA Guidelines with a Memorandum-to-File in 1982. Subsequently, DOE has made a determination that an Environmental Assessment should be prepared to address NSR's modification and operation. The EA is still being prepared and will be completed and approved prior to startup. Prior to approval, DOE will provide the EA to the states of South Carolina and Georgia for review and comment, consistent with DOE's initiatives to closely coordinate actions with states which host DOE facilities.

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GREENPEACE NEWS

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GREENPEACE CALLS FOR DELAY IN STARTING NEW SAVANNAH RIVER SITE PLUTONIUM PLANT

Augusta, GA, Aug. 28 (GP) -- Today the international environmental organization Greenpeace released a report calling for a delay in starting up a new plutonium plant at the Department of Energy's Savannah River Site, until the federal government analyzes the feasibility of re-using plutonium components of nuclear warheads instead of building new ones.

The report, entitled "Bleak Future for Plutonium Operations at the Savannah River Site: An End to Plutonium Recycling?" was prepared by the Greenpeace campaign to stop nuclear weapons production.

The Department of Energy's New Special Recovery Facility at the SRS, recently constructed at a cost of over \$80 million, would recycle, or purify, plutonium for use in bomb manufacturing operations at the DOE's Rocky Flats Plant in Colorado.

DOE has postponed startup of the facility several times, though it has stated that a startup will be attempted sometime in 1991. Currently, DOE is preparing an Environmental Assessment (EA) on the new plutonium facility, but it is not known when the EA will be released publicly. Greenpeace has requested that a comment period be allowed on the EA.

"Plutonium recycling operations at the troubled Savannah River Site appear to face a bleak future," according to Jason Salzman of Greenpeace's Boulder, Colorado office. "An end to recycling of this fiendishly toxic material may well be at hand."

Plutonium is a radioactive isotope created in nuclear reactors. With a half-life of 24,000 years, a microscopic speck, if ingested, can cause cancer.

New DOE research and pending federal legislation may eliminate any need for purified or "recycled" plutonium from the new SRS plant, according to the Greenpeace report.

DOE research indicates that plutonium components, commonly called "pits" or "triggers," for new warheads can be extracted from retired warheads and re-used, rather than manufactured at Rocky Flats. A plutonium pit, is basically a small nuclear warhead which ignites a more powerful hydrogen explosion in a warhead.

Initial tests of reused pits have "exceeded" the expectations of officials at the DOE's Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, located in California. And if the new procedure turns out to be feasible, DOE bomb plant workers may be subject to less exposure to radiation.

If Rocky Flats stops manufacturing new plutonium pits, then there will be no need for purified plutonium from the new SRS plant and therefore the plant need not go into operation, according to the Greenpeace report.

Greenpeace points to recent federal legislation to support its claim. In early August the U.S. Senate passed a measure stipulating that a series of reports on "pit reuse" be prepared prior to restart of Rocky Flats. Because the new SRS plutonium plant would essentially replicate plutonium purification operations at Rocky Flats, Greenpeace argues that operation of the new SRS plant should also be delayed until the feasibility of pit reuse is assessed.

To help determine that plutonium from the new SRS plant is needed, the new SRS plutonium facility should be included in the DOE's study on the "reconfiguration" of the nuclear weapons complex and not considered for start up until the study is complete. SRS is considered a prime candidate to become the DOE's reconfigured "supersite." Environmental Impact Statement hearings on the "reconfiguration," or modernization, of DOE concluded on August 28 in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Similar hearings were held on July 10 in Columbia, SC and on August 21 in Atlanta.

"It is extremely troubling to see the DOE rushing to begin operation of a facility for which there is no use," said Tom Clements of Greenpeace's Atlanta office. "Given the triumph of the forces of democracy in the Soviet Union, it is ludicrous to start up this new plutonium facility."

The New York Times

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PLUTONIUM PLANT FOR ATOMIC ARMS HAS BEGUN TESTS

FIRST ONE BUILT SINCE '60

No Hearings or Formal Review
for \$86 Million Complex
in South Carolina

By KEITH SCHNEIDER

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Nov. 9 — The Energy Department has begun testing an \$86 million plutonium processing center in South Carolina that is scheduled to begin operating in June and would be the first entirely new plant to produce nuclear weapons materials since 1960.

Although Congress appropriated the money for the new plant, the Energy Department has been building it at the Savannah River nuclear weapons plant for seven years without public hearings or a formal review of the potential effect on the environment. Such steps are required by Federal environmental law, say two national environmental groups, Greenpeace and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

"The Energy Department has pledged for several years to be completely open and honest about what they're doing and how they're doing it," said Stephen Schwartz, a lobbyist in Washington for Greenpeace. "And here, by chance, we've uncovered a major new processing facility that is being built and about to go into operation without any ability on the part of the public to scrutinize it."

Assessment Is Under Way

A spokesman for the Energy Department, Timothy Tomastik, said that a less rigorous study, an environmental assessment, was begun earlier this year and that the Energy Department would decide whether to conduct a more thorough study and hold public hearings when the assessment is finished next month.

Dan W. Reicher, a senior lawyer with the Natural Resources Defense Council, said today that his group was prepared to sue the Government unless public hearings were held and a formal statement on the plant's effect on the environment was begun.

Budget items for the new plant were included in the annual appropriations bills approved by Congress for the Energy Department. But the new plant was not widely known outside the department until environmental groups in South Carolina and Washington studying the appropriations bills discovered it and pressed the agency to disclose details about it.

An article about the new plant was published on Nov. 4, by The Augusta Chronicle after the Georgia newspaper

Continued on Page 10, Column 3



U.S. Is Testing New Nuclear Weapons Plant Built in South Carolina

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was alerted by Greenpeace researchers.

The new processing center was built on the top of a 36-year-old plutonium production building at Savannah River. It was described in documents prepared by the Energy Department in 1982 as a two-story, 174,000-cubic-foot structure capable of recovering and recycling plutonium from scrap materials.

Alongside the production area, the department planned to erect a separate 125,000-cubic-foot building containing changing rooms, offices and other areas for workers. Both structures, the department said, were intended to replace an obsolete center that performed the same functions.

But in the mid-1980's, the building's design changed. The new plant now consists of a 193,000-cubic-foot first level, and a second level of 210,000 cubic feet. In a 1984 report, the Energy Department said the extra space would permit the installation of equipment for producing plutonium metal capable of being used in nuclear weapons.

No Others Being Built

Asked whether there were other large processing buildings under construction in the nuclear weapons industry that have not been widely publicized or considered in public hearings, Mr. Tomastik, the Energy Department spokesman replied: "There are no special recovery facilities similar to this one under construction. The answer to the question is no, there are none out there."

The completion of the Special Recovery Facility at Savannah River comes in a period of enormous trouble in the Energy Department's plutonium production industry. The department's principal plutonium center, the Rocky Flats Plant near Denver, has been shut for a year because of an array of mechanical and managerial weaknesses

A 7-year project emerges when advocates study appropriations.

that the department said made it a hazard to employees and to the region's residents.

James D. Watkins, the Secretary of Energy, has said in Congressional hearings and other public forums that the nation has more than enough plutonium to satisfy its need for producing new weapons and maintaining the 20,000 or so warheads in the nuclear arsenal.

But the shutdown of Rocky Flats has halted the department's ability to reprocess plutonium recovered from old warheads taken out of the arsenal, and to prepare plutonium-contaminated radioactive wastes for safe disposal in permanent repositories.

In 1981 the Energy Department completed a new \$225 million plutonium processing building to replace an old structure at Rocky Flats. But because of design flaws and mechanical breakdowns the building became so contaminated with radiation that the department had to close a month after it began operating in 1982. Rocky Flats continued to produce plutonium for weapons in its old structures until being closed in 1988 and again in 1989.

How long the Rocky Flats Plant remains shut has not been decided by the Energy Department, but agency officials have made no secret of their desire to transfer the plant's capabilities to other nuclear weapons sites across the country.

With new arms control agreements with the Soviet Union expected to take thousands more warheads out of the arsenal in the next few years, the na-

tion needs the ability to safely recover and reprocess the plutonium, said Mr. Watkins.

One place that could take up some of the Rocky Flats mission is a plutonium processing building, designated TA-55, at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. An independent advisory committee visited the building in September. On Tuesday, the panel's chairman, Dr. John F. Ahearne, wrote to Mr. Watkins recommending that "serious consideration be given to how the capabilities at TA-55 could be used to provide broader benefits to the complex."

Thus, the Special Recovery Facility at Savannah River would become the second site available to the Energy Department for duplicating the operations of Rocky Flats.

The new installation has complete capabilities to reprocess almost any form of plutonium, and according to department documents the agency has spent \$8.8 million this year to make it able to recycle plutonium from retired warheads, a job previously done at Rocky Flats.

In a hearing before Dr. Ahearne's committee on Oct. 30, John Ford, the director of the Energy Department's Office of Processing, said the Special Recovery Facility could do "most of what Rocky Flats does."

If the Energy Department determines that a full environmental review is needed before the Special Recovery Facility begins to operate, its opening could be delayed by a year or more, said Energy Department officials and environmental lawyers.

DOE plutonium plant at SRS disclosed

Greenpeace Action complains environment impact statement not made

By John Winters
Staff Writer

For seven years, the Department of Energy has been building a plutonium reprocessing plant at the Savannah River Site that could replace some operations at the troubled Rocky Flats Plant in Colorado and which has never been subjected to the scrutiny of a formal environmental impact review.

The construction came to light after the environmental group Greenpeace Action learned of the facility and raised charges late last week that DOE is breaking federal environmental laws by not completing an environmental impact statement.

The group also claims DOE has built the plutonium reprocessing plant to take the place of Rocky Flats, which was shut down last year because of safety problems - including an accumulation of plutonium in the plant's system that posed a risk of explosion. Enough plutoni-

um to make seven nuclear bombs had collected in the ventilation and could have caused a spontaneous nuclear reaction.

But DOE said Greenpeace is stretching its allegations.

Agency officials said the facility will be subjected to environmental reviews, although later than normal for such studies and possibly not to the same formal level. And it won't take the place of Rocky Flats because it can't handle the same volume.

But whether Rocky Flats will be shut down, and some of its operations transferred to SRS, is under consideration, agency officials said.

The purpose of the New Special Recovery Facility is to reprocess plutonium scrap that previously couldn't be used into a suitable form of weapons-grade plutonium. DOE officials said the facility will save money in the long run by making the plutonium usable, instead of having to develop facilities to store the

radioactive scrap for centuries.

Construction on the recovery facility began in 1983, and while the majority of work is completed, some modifications still are ongoing. Figures on construction costs and the number of employees were not immediately available.

The facility is actually an addition to the F-Canyon, where plutonium produced at the SRS reactors is processed and purified.

DOE spokesman Rick Ford said the department is working on an environmental assessment, which will determine if the full environmental report is needed. Usually, however, such a study is done before construction begins.

"The thinking at the time was that this was an addition to an existing facility, so the full environmental impact statement process was not needed," Mr. Ford said, adding the addi-

Please see SRS on 12A

SRS: Greenpeace wary of new plant

Continued from 1A

tion was considered an improvement over existing processes. The new recovery facility will contain any radioactive releases, and all work will be done remotely.

If the full environmental study is not needed, the addition could begin operations in June 1991 after environmental assessments and safety reviews are completed.

The plutonium scrap will be dissolved within the new facility and the resulting weapons-grade plutonium transported to F-Canyon for purification. The plutonium then is made into metal buttons similar to hockey pucks, and stored for future use.

"This gives us the capability to handle scrap that has accumulated over the years that we haven't previously been able to handle," Mr. Ford said, adding that the scrap will come from SRS and other facilities.

For years, Rocky Flats has handled the reprocessing and recycling of plutonium scrap. The plant was shut down last year over safety concerns.

Greenpeace believes the new facility is part of a plan to transport Rocky Flats operations to SRS.

"Without any public discussion, without an analysis of the environmental impact, DOE is taking the first step toward moving Rocky Flats to Savannah River," said Stephen Schwartz, legislative coordinator for the Greenpeace Nuclear Free Future Campaign.

"This totally undermines the openness with which Secretary (James) Watkins pledged to run DOE," he added.

rials.

Since then, the Energy secretary has ordered a review of the plan.

That review is expected this

month. A final modernization report is due in 1994 and will outline which and how various plants - like SRS - will be used in the future.

But DOE spokeswoman Debbie Smith said the new SRS recovery facility "is not anywhere near the size and capacity of Rocky Flats."

She also said any decision about transferring Rocky Flats operations to SRS will be made after a review of the department's modernization plan.

Energy's first such plan called for moving many functions at other DOE facilities to SRS.

An addenda to the modernization report recommended closing the Rocky Flats, Mound and Fernald plants and moving them to SRS. Fernald produces uranium ingots for the SRS reactors; and Mound produces small explosive devices, although it also fabricates and procures nuclear mate-

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Editorial Page 4-A

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"The history of liberty is a history of limitations of governmental power, not the increase of it. When we resist, therefore, the concentration of power, we are resisting the process of death, because concentration of power is what always precedes the destruction of human liberties."

— Woodrow Wilson

SRS' 'secret' plant

A new \$86 million project at the Savannah River Site should be cause for cheer in our area, but the plant's plutonium processing center has instead raised suspicions.

The enthusiasm Central Savannah River Area residents usually give to new Department of Energy initiatives is largely absent because of the unnecessarily secret nature of the program.

For seven years the DOE has been building the new plant, yet no public hearings or environmental impact reviews were ever held, as required by federal law. People should be alarmed when government ignores its own laws.

The only reason the public knows what's going on now is because some environmentalists found out from Congress' appropriations bills and notified this newspaper.

After the whistle was blown earlier this month, DOE officials engaged in a bit of damage control — claiming the new plant is "an addition to an existing facility" which did not require a full environmental report. Then they said they might change their minds and hold hearings later.

They also deny that the new plant, which could begin operations in June unless hearings hold it up, is designed to take the place of Colorado's Rocky Flats plutonium reprocessing center, shut down last year because of safety problems. On the other hand, they admit the SRS facility will take up some of the slack caused by Rocky Flats' shutdown.

All this makes at least somewhat credible environmentalists' charges that DOE is shifting all of Rocky Flats' operations to SRS.

Whether the agency plans to use the new facility in part or in full to replace the Colorado plant, the fact is this is an awfully ambitious and serious project to undertake without any public input.

Moreover, it certainly trashes DOE Secretary James Watkins' oft-stated promise to be completely open and above board about what's going on at SRS and other nuclear weapons plants.

Also called into question is Watkins' credibility when he told Congress the nation has more than enough plutonium to meet its needs for producing new weapons and maintaining warheads in the existing nuclear arsenal. If that were true, why does he need the new facility?

If Watkins wants to dispel suspicions surrounding SRS' activities he must see to it that his agency starts practicing what he preaches — total disclosure on everything that's going on out there that's unrelated to national security.

There was no call for the new plant's secrecy. And DOE has only made matters worse by behaving like the naughty little boy who got caught red-handed doing something he shouldn't.

This is a mighty poor way to build public confidence in the agency's management and operations.



JAY QUADRACCI / Daily Camera

MESSAGE UNVEILED: Greenpeace spokesman Tom Clements wraps up some burlap Tuesday used to cover a new message on a billboard along Colo. 93 near the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons plant south of Boulder.



Charlie Johnson/Colorado Daily

Shut down

Tom Clements, a Greenpeace campaigner, addresses media members during the unveiling of a new message on one of the billboards near Rocky Flats along Colorado 93. See story on Page 3.