



Savannah River Site Watch

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**For Immediate Release**

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**Contact: Tom Clements, Director, SRS Watch, 803-240-7268, [tomclements329@cs.com](mailto:tomclements329@cs.com)** – available for comment, including in front of the entrance to the plant during the week of August 2, 2021

**Draft Environmental Impact Statement on Westinghouse Nuclear Fuel Plant Quietly Released by Nuclear Regulatory Commission; Groundwater Contamination Issues and Ever-Present Accident Threat Don't Justify 40-Year License Extension**

**Draft EIS Glosses Over Current Contamination and Ignores Future Impacts; Brushes Aside Environmental Justice Concerns & Totally Avoids Review of Role in Nuclear Weapons; Public Encouraged to Comment on Draft EIS, Attend Public Comment Session**

**Columbia, SC** – The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission today released a flawed [draft Environmental Impact Statement \(EIS\) on operation of the Westinghouse nuclear fuel plant](#) located near Columbia, South Carolina. The draft EIS, prepared as part of an overly long 40-year license extension request by Westinghouse, essentially sweeps environmental impacts and threats from the plant under the rug. The document, related to the production of uranium fuel rods for nuclear power reactors, will now be subject to public evaluation and comment.

A quick review of the draft EIS by Savannah River Site Watch, which has been tracking the facility for many years, reveals on the first page that the NRC is using the document to support the lengthy period for a renewed license: "Based on its environmental review, the NRC staff preliminarily recommends that the WEC's 21 license SNM-1107 for the operation of the CFFF be renewed for an additional 40 years."

Due to periodic accidents at the site and chronic groundwater contamination and potential for future accidents and negative environmental and health impacts, such a lengthy period for a license extension has been opposed by the public and will continue to be opposed, according to the public interest group Savannah River Site Watch (SRS Watch).

The NRC staff concluded in the draft EIS "that impacts on groundwater from the proposed action would be SMALL to MODERATE." Yet, contradicting itself, the NRC admitted that "the proposed continued operation of the CFFF for an additional 40 years could noticeably alter onsite groundwater quality."

Likewise, the NRC claimed small future impact but admitted that "there is a low potential for contaminants to move offsite." Given past accidents and releases of radioactive materials, the NRC is not able to make a case that moderate or severe accidents or off-site releases are guaranteed to be avoided but instead claims that releases can be moderated.

The Congaree River is downgradient from the facility and the river receives wastewater discharge via a pipe from the facility. The Westinghouse plant is located in Hopkins, SC, on Bluff Road between downtown Columbia and the road to the Congaree National Park.

In comparing a 40-year license renewal with that for 20 years, the NRC concluded that “The NRC staff found that the potential environmental impacts from this alternative [20 years] would be similar to the potential impacts from the proposed action [40 years] except that the impacts would occur over a shorter timeframe.” This argument is ludicrous, according to SRS Watch, as demonstrated by repeated accidents and releases over the past twenty years of operation, a predictor that such problems will be much greater after 40 years rather than 20 years of operation.

“More accidents and releases at the fuel plant are unavoidable and the NRC has simply ignored that fact in the flawed environmental document,” said Tom Clements, director of SRS Watch. “This draft EIS does not make the case for a 40-year license extension but rather demonstrates the chronic nature of environmental impacts from the operation of the facility and thus weakly supports a license renewal for a maximum period of 10 years,” added Clements.

Concerning Environmental Justice, an issue of concern given the location of the facility in “Lower Richland,” the NRC claims with almost no EJ discussion that “no disproportionately high and adverse health or environmental effects could be identified for this action.”

In information which is new to SRS Watch, the draft EIS confirms the presence near to the fuel plant of the Denley Cemetery, which “operated from approximately 1890 to 1940 [and which] contains more than 100 graves of African Americans” and that Native American archaeological resources are in the area but claims if there are future unnamed impacts to such that they “would be avoided, minimized, or mitigated.” No guarantee is given for that claim.

A huge oversight in the document is its failure to review the waste streams from the facility’s area that produces rods - Tritium Producing Burnable Absorber Rods (TPBARs) - for production of tritium for nuclear weapons. That nuclear weapons part of the plant is operated by Westinghouse Government Services (WesDyne), which produces the rods that are irradiated in a commercial nuclear reactor in Tennessee to produce radioactive tritium. That gas is extracted at the Savannah River Site and is used in all US nuclear weapons, to boost the explosive power of the weapon. “The exclusion of the tritium-rod-production issue from the draft EIS is essentially an admission that tritium rod production is a rogue operation that is unregulated,” according to Clements.

A 45-day public comment period will begin when the release of the Draft EIS is noticed in the Federal Register. As that period of time is too short for the public to properly analyze the document and submit official comments, SRS Watch and others encourage public comments and will request an extension of the comment period.

The NRC initially prepared an Environmental Assessment in 2018 on the facility’s license renewal request but that document was withdrawn and the process was eventually terminated due to public protest over environmental incidents at the facility. The NRC announced the EIS process in July 2020.

The Westinghouse plant, which produces uranium fuel for foreign and domestic commercial nuclear power reactors, began operation in 1969. A 20-year license extension in 2007 extended the license to September 2027. The current 40-year license extension was applied for in 2014 but it is not clear why it was applied for so long before the current license expires.

It is believed that a 40-year license extension was requested to more easily allow the facility to operate long term despite chronic groundwater contamination problems and a series of accidents resulting in leaks or atmospheric release of nuclear materials. At various hearings and meetings the public has uniformly opposed the lengthy license extension, calling for a much shorter period of time, such as 10 years, to be reviewed. But the NRC has obviously ignored public opinion in its preparation of the document.

Below is the text of an email message sent by NRC to a few members of the public on the Westinghouse email list, on July 30, 11:52 a.m. As of the time of this SRS Watch news release, [the NRC](#) has not issued a news release or statement about the draft EIS.

*The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) staff has prepared a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the Westinghouse Electric Company, LLC's request to renew its operating license for the Columbia Fuel Fabrication Facility (CFFF) located in Hopkins, South Carolina for an additional 40 years.*

*The DEIS is publicly available from the NRC's Agencywide Documents Access and Management System (ADAMS) using accession number ML21209A213. ADAMS is accessible from the NRC website at <http://www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/adams.html>. The DEIS is also accessible using the following link: <https://www.nrc.gov/docs/ML2120/ML21209A213.pdf>, and will be available via the NRC webpage for the WEC's CFFF at <https://www.nrc.gov/info-finder/fc/westinghouse-fuel-fab-fac-sc-lc.html>.*

*The official 45-day public comment period on the DEIS will start upon the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency publication of a notice of availability in the Federal Register. The NRC staff also plans to publish a notice in the Federal Register with the instructions on how to submit comments. A separate notification will be sent out at that time with information about how to comment.*

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**Notes:**

**NRC's Draft EIS, released July 30, 2021:** <https://www.nrc.gov/docs/ML2120/ML21209A213.pdf>

**Aerial photos of the plant, by High Flyer, are available on request.**

**NRC website on the Westinghouse Columbia Fuel Fabrication Facility:**  
<https://www.nrc.gov/info-finder/fc/westinghouse-fuel-fab-fac-sc-lc.html>

**NRC letter, May 28, 2021, with schedule for EIS process and licensing decision:**  
<https://www.nrc.gov/docs/ML2113/ML21138A926.pdf>

**NRC letter on 20-year license renewal submitted in 2005 and approved in 2007, to Sept. 30, 2027:**  
<https://www.nrc.gov/docs/ML0721/ML072150507.pdf>

**South Carolina Dept. of Health & Environmental Control & Westinghouse “Consent Agreement” on monitoring site and addressing problems, 2019:** <https://scdhec.gov/environment/ongoing-projects-updates/westinghouse/westinghouse-bureau-land-waste-management>

**Westinghouse website on fuel plant:** <https://www.westinghousenuclear.com/about/independent-pages/columbia-community>