

Sequoyah to Produce Bomb-grade Material

The Tennessee Valley Authority is preparing to make a key component for America's hydrogen bombs at its Sequoyah Nuclear Plant near Soddy-Daisy. In the White House budget, the U.S. Department of Energy said it wants TVA to make bomb-grade tritium at Sequoyah, similar to what TVA has done at its Watts Bar plant near Spring City, Tennessee, for the past decade. TVA officials said that adding military production to Sequoyah's energy generation will have only a minimal impact on plant operations and fulfills the agency's federal mission. "We've tested and done this type of production at Watts Bar since 1999 with limited impact on our operations," TVA Vice President Jack Bailey said.

DOE spokeswoman Jennifer Wagner said the military needs fresh sources of tritium to replace the decaying radioactive isotope. Tritium decays about 5 percent a year and has a half-life of a little more than 12 years, meaning that half of it dissipates over that time. "Tritium is vital to maintaining a safe, secure and effective nuclear deterrent," Ms. Wagner said. President Obama has emphasized that he wants to pursue nuclear arms reductions even as the military maintains its nuclear weapons production capacity, including tritium.

In the White House budget for fiscal 2011, the budget for DOE's National Nuclear Security Administration will jump by 13.4 percent to \$11.2 billion. Ms. Wagner said the average annual costs from tritium production are forecast at \$56 million per year, of which about \$24 million will be paid for fuel costs.

The energy department quit making its own tritium in 1988 when it closed its aging reactors at its Savannah River Site. Mr. Bailey said DOE and TVA agreed in 1999 to a 35-year agreement to produce tritium at Watts Bar -- and to use Sequoyah as a backup site -- after DOE rejected an earlier bid by TVA to turn over its Bellefonte plant in Scottsboro, Alabama for full-time tritium output. The plans to produce tritium at Watts Bar initially were opposed by many local residents and elected officials, including then-U.S. Rep. Van Hilleary, R-Spring City, who lived near the plant. But Rhea County Mayor Billy Ray Patton said most of those early concerns have gone away.

"Prior to tritium being produced at Watts Bar, there were a lot of questions and concerns here in Rhea County," he said. "But I don't see any problems of them producing tritium at Watts Bar, and I don't see any problems with them doing it at Sequoyah, as well. It's worked out fine.