

Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance Nuclear Watch New Mexico

GROUPS JOIN TO DEMAND ANSWERS ABOUT BOMB PLANT PLANS

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The Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance (Oak Ridge, TN) and Nuclear Watch New Mexico (Santa Fe, NM) today filed a Freedom of Information Act request asking the Department of Energy (DOE) to come clean about its plans for a new, multi-billion dollar nuclear bomb plant proposed for the Y-12 Nuclear Weapons Complex in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

The Uranium Processing Facility (UPF) is a highly troubled project that has exploded in estimated costs from an original \$600 million to as high as \$19 billion. Since then, in order to attempt to cap project spending at \$6.5 billion, DOE has reduced the scope of the UPF by eliminating dismantlement operations and assuming a mission of production-only for nuclear weapons. After a half-billion dollar design mistake for which no one has been held accountable, DOE has abandoned its previous “big box” concept for the UPF in favor of a modular approach that includes the continuing use of unsafe, aging facilities previously slated for demolition. Despite these major changes, DOE has indicated it does not plan to update the legally required environmental review process it completed in 2011, but which must now address potential impacts of the new plan.

The groups’ FOIA request asks the government to release its Supplement Analysis—a study required by law when a federal agency makes a substantial change to its formally recorded Record of Decision. A Supplement Analysis is used to determine whether the agency needs to prepare a new Environmental Impact Statement, a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement, or no new environmental analysis. The law requires DOE to make the Supplement Analysis publicly available, and the document would likely provide much valuable and up-to-date information on the UPF project. Alternatively, DOE may be legally vulnerable if no Supplement Analysis has been prepared.

Ralph Hutchison, coordinator of the Oak Ridge Environmental Peace Alliance, stressed that his organization is determined to hold the DOE publicly accountable over its plans for Oak Ridge and Y-12. “We live here. We are the ones placed at risk when people in Washington make decisions to keep building nuclear bombs in buildings that do not meet safety codes or even weakened seismic standards. At the very least, we deserve an explanation. We’ve previously asked DOE politely and got no answer. So now we are resorting to a FOIA request and subsequent steps as needed.”

Jay Coghlan, Executive Director of Nuclear Watch New Mexico, noted, “We had a similar situation at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, when the government changed plans for a new multi-billion dollar plutonium facility. In our case, DOE responded to citizen pressure and prepared a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement. We believe the same is legally required for the Uranium Processing Facility.”

The Freedom of Information Act requires federal agencies to respond to FOIA requests within twenty working days. OREPA and Nuclear Watch NM have requested expedited processing of their request as provided for by the Freedom of Information Act.

Ralph Hutchison added, “We think informing Congress and the public of the status of the UPF’s compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act is urgently needed because of the project’s substantial changes and the thirty percent increase in funding. Determination of UPF’s NEPA status and updated public review could help prevent further waste of taxpayers’ money after more than a half-billion dollars has already been squandered.”

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OREPA’s and Nuclear Watch NM’s FOIA request is available at:
<http://orepa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/OREPA-NWNM-FOIA.pdf>