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NUCLEAR DISPOSAL DEAL STRUCK NEW SRS PLANTS WOULD HELP U.S. PROCESS EXCESS PLUTONIUM

BYLINE: Brandon Haddock; Staff Writer

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U.S. negotiators have widened a path for proposed plutonium-processing plants at Savannah River Site.

Vice President Al Gore signed an agreement Friday with Russia under which each nation would dispose of 55 tons of its surplus plutonium. To fulfill U.S. obligations, the Department of Energy plans to build three plants at SRS to treat plutonium and prepare it for disposal.

Site supporters have pushed for the plants, which would cost about \$ 1.4 billion and create hundreds of long-term jobs at the federal nuclear-weapons site.

"We're excited about the signing," said Don Blackmon, project development and outreach manager for Duke COGEMA Stone & Webster, the firm that is designing one of the proposed SRS plants.

"Assuming that it has in it what we expect it to have in it, then we think that's great," Mr. Blackmon said of the accord. "Congress is looking for that agreement to be signed to ensure that the program continues on course."

But some observers did not share such optimism. The agreement relies on the recycling of some plutonium into nuclear-reactor fuel, which many activists have called a costly and dangerous exercise.

Plutonium can cause cancer if even tiny amounts of the metal are inhaled.

The accord also fails to cement safety standards, and resolve liability issues, at proposed plutonium-treatment plants in Russia, said Tom Clements, executive director at the Nuclear Control Institute in Washington.

"We think there should be more agreement on them at this point, instead of putting them off into the future," Mr. Clements said Friday during a telephone interview. "The whole program will get rolling without these issues being finalized.

"To proceed without having worked out these difficult points is not necessarily a prudent way to proceed on such a serious matter."

The plan also faces financial hurdles. Russia cannot afford to fund its own plutonium plants. The United States has pledged up to \$ 200 million to help Russia pay for its program, but other nations have not been so forthcoming.

At July's summit of the "Group of Eight" - Great Britain, Canada, Japan, Germany, Italy, France, Russia and the United

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States - foreign leaders postponed until next year a decision about providing international funding to Russia's plutonium program.

"It will be problematic," Mr. Clements said of the funding issue. "I think that in large part, the agreement is window dressing and they will not be able to carry out this program without these other things."

REACH Brandon Haddock at (706) 823-3409 or

bhaddock@augustachronicle.com.

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