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Local

SRS set for key post-Cold War role

Aiken site might make all radioactive parts for nuclear weapons as U.S.

shuts other plants

By JENNIFER TALHELM
Knight Ridder Newspapers

Aiken -- In the wake of the Cold War's end, some links in America's chain of bomb factories are being shut down. But South Carolina's Savannah River Site is set to become the new linchpin of the nation's nuclear weapons complex.

Experts say it's the leading candidate for new facilities that will bring a federal investment of up to \$5 billion during the next 20 years. Almost all the radioactive components for nuclear weapons would be made in Aiken.

Consider:

By most accounts, SRS is the top choice for a new \$2 billion to \$4 billion plant to make plutonium "pits," which trigger a nuclear weapon's blast.

Within the next decade, it is scheduled to begin processing old bomb material into fuel for Charlotte-area nuclear power plants.

Through pure chance, poor management at other sites and support in South Carolina, Savannah River Site is one of the few old bomb plants left standing.

The site has been prominent in the news as Gov. Jim Hodges fights the U.S. Department of Energy's plans to store plutonium there.

In reality, he and most of the state's elected representatives support keeping the 310-square-mile site alive. It is an economic giant employing thousands with a payroll topping \$1 billion.

Massive new facilities could bring hundreds of construction jobs and new permanent high-paying jobs to a poor state hungry for outside investment.

"It would be like losing four BMW plants" to lose Savannah River Site," said U.S. Rep. Lindsey Graham, a Republican from Seneca. "You'd lose a major employer, and how could America fill the void?"

OTHER SITES CLOSING

Until recent years, other facilities shared in the making of nuclear bombs.

Plutonium "pits," grapefruit-sized metal shells squeezed by high explosives to make a nuclear blast, were made at the Energy Department's Rocky Flats plant near Denver. Hanford in Washington state also made plutonium. Pantex, in Amarillo, Texas, assembled nuclear bombs.

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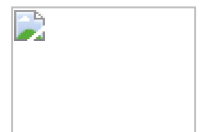
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But Hanford and Rocky Flats are badly polluted and are being shut down. In 1989, Rocky Flats was raided by the EPA for suspected environmental violations. The Energy Department contractor there was ordered to pay \$18 million in fines, and the site never resumed production of plutonium pits.

Since then, the country has not made pits for weapons.

SRS has not been officially chosen for the new pit factorythe site-selection process begins this September. It also is not certain that the plant would be built, though the Bush administration says that having the ability to produce pits is important to ensure the future of the nuclear stockpile.

In its favor, Savannah River has a nearly 50-year history of handling plutonium. It also has sophisticated waste-handling and security systems.

All those factors give the site the edge over other facilities vying for the pit factory, said Mal McKibben, president of an Aiken-based pro-nuclear group.

Environmentalists and anti-nuclear activists say it's ironic that as the government builds facilities to keep up its nuclear stockpile, it is reducing the arsenal at the same place in the plutonium processing plant.

Under a disarmament agreement with Russia, the Energy Department plans to build a \$1.5 billion plant at SRS, where it will turn 34 metric tons of plutonium into mixed oxide, or MOX, fuel. The fuel will be used in Duke Power's two Charlotte-area nuclear power plants.

Ed Lyman, of the nonproliferation group The Nuclear Control Institute, says that concentrating the plutonium factories at Savannah River increases the chance terrorists will target the site to try to get plutonium for bombs. "I think they're overlooking the risks the site does pose to them in the long term," Lyman said.

#### A HISTORY

Savannah River Site has another characteristic that makes it ideal for a federal weapons complex, historians and others say.

South Carolina is a conservative place where patriotism is highly valued, and where the anti-nuclear and environmental movements have never been strong.

The federal government began building the plant in 1952, uprooting the entire town of Ellenton and others to clear cotton fields and piney woods for SRS.

According to USC Aiken history professor James Farmer, the area between Aiken and Augusta, Ga., along the slow-moving Savannah River, met the necessary profile for a Cold War-era bomb plant. It had a city large enough to supply workers and housing, it was on a river, and it was out of the range of Soviet bombers.

The new engineers and government workers who moved in with it changed everything about the Aiken area. Locals called the newcomers "Yankees with slide rules," Farmer said.

But gradually, the Savannah River Site became part of the community. At its peak, nearly 25,000 people worked at there. That was just one of the reasons why few, if any, S.C. residents had second thoughts over the years about what dangers might be associated with the plant.

"Fifty years have passed. People who had to deal with the initial shock are gone," Farmer said. "Most people have grown up with the Savannah River Site as a normal part of life."

#### OTHER NUCLEAR PROJECTS

