



Savannah River Site Watch

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US Nuclear Regulatory Commission Terminates License (“Construction Authorization”) for Plutonium Fuel (MOX) Plant at DOE’s Savannah River Site; Any Hope of Reviving Bungled Project is Shattered

See NRC letter and two enclosures linked in “notes” below

Columbia, SC – The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission has taken the irreversible step to terminate the construction license for the plutonium fuel (MOX) project at DOE’s Savannah River Site in South Carolina. The action by the NRC means that any hopes of reviving the MOX project are now officially dead, according to Savannah River Site Watch.

The termination of the “construction authorization” was sent to license holder CB&I Areva MOX Services on February 8, 2019, with copies sent DOE’s National Nuclear Security Administration, the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board, the SC Department of Health and Environmental Control and to parties that had intervened against the license. The NRC letter and two enclosure detailing the termination decision were made public on February 11, 2019.

An enclosure attached to the NRC’s letter concisely states the NRC’s termination decision: “In accordance with CB&I AREVA MOX Services, letter dated November 1, 2018 (Agencywide Documents Access and Management System Accession Number ML18305A356), this Construction Authorization is hereby terminated.”

“With this action by the NRC, the construction license for the MOX project is now officially dead and there is no way the project can be revived without starting the licensing process from the beginning,” said Tom Clements, director of Savannah River Site Watch. “With the license termination, the NRC has also terminated the dream of MOX supporters to revive the bungled project,” added Clements. “This is the very final nail in the coffin of MOX, a wasteful, mismanaged project that was ill-fated from the day construction began and which should have been terminated many years ago.”

The construction license was issued in March 2005, after extensive opposition by a number of public interest groups, including the Union of Concerned Scientists and Nuclear Watch South. Construction began in 2007 and a decade later, due to design problems, construction problems and mismanagement,

the project was nowhere near finished. The license was initially issued for 10 years, to 2015, and in 2014 the construction authorization was extended to 2025, a sign of the massive delays construction was facing. DOE ordered construction activities to be terminated in October 2018.

The license for the MOX plant consisted of two parts: 1) construction authorization, which has now been terminated, and 2) License to Possess and Use Special Nuclear Material. Issuance of the license to possess plutonium and other nuclear materials was deferred until construction of the Mixed Oxide Fuel Fabrication Facility was completed, meaning that the materials license was never finalized. Thus, as no nuclear materials were introduced into the plant, the NRC has determined that no decommissioning plan is necessary: “The NRC staff has determined that no decommissioning actions are required to terminate the CA and that no radiological contamination exists at the site because no nuclear material was procured or brought on site.”

Likewise, the NRC, pursuant to license conditions, has determined that any classified materials are to be returned to the possession of the NNSA.

The NRC ends its evaluation of the request by CB&I MOX Services to terminate the construction authorization (CA) by stating: “The NRC staff concludes that terminating the CA does not represent a risk to public health and safety and the environment and that a sufficient basis exists to terminate the CA since no radioactive material was present at the facility. Therefore, the NRC staff grants the termination of CAMOX-001 as requested by MOX Services.”

While DOE has stated the intention to convert the MOX plant to production of plutonium pits for nuclear weapons, there a host of problems to that approach, according to SRS Watch. “There remain lingering design and construction problems which remain unresolved due to the abrupt halt to construction and they pose challenges to any facility reuse. Revealing the obstacles of the situation to their conceptual plans, NNSA has so far failed to make any public case that the MOX design and construction problems can be resolved in order that dangerous weapon-grade plutonium can be safely handled,” said Clements of SRS Watch.

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Notes:

NRC cover letter, February 8, 2019:

<https://adamswebsearch2.nrc.gov/webSearch2/main.jsp?AccessionNumber=ML18318A135>

enclosure 1:

<https://adamswebsearch2.nrc.gov/webSearch2/main.jsp?AccessionNumber=ML18324A745>

enclosure 2:

<https://adamswebsearch2.nrc.gov/webSearch2/main.jsp?AccessionNumber=ML18324A737>