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Savannah River Reactor to Stay Shut; 1,200 Layoffs Set

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A battered old nuclear reactor at the Energy Department's Savannah River, S.C., weapons plant that is the nation's only source of a radioactive gas used in nuclear warheads will not be restarted, Energy Secretary Hazel R. O'Leary has announced.

The reactor will be placed in "cold standby," making it unlikely that it will ever resume operation. At least 1,200 workers at the plant near Aiken, S.C., will be laid off, O'Leary said.

The department has spent about \$1.5 billion to repair and modernize the facility known as K reactor since it and two others at the same site were shut down for safety reasons in 1988. Restarting K reactor was one of the highest priorities of the Bush administration's energy secretary, James D. Watkins, because it is the only U.S. facility capable of producing tritium, an isotope of hydrogen used to enhance the explosive power of nuclear warheads.

As late as 1990, the Bush administration planned to restart all three Savannah River reactors and build

two new ones at a cost of more than \$8 billion to ensure a reliable tritium stockpile.

But the end of the Cold War has changed all the assumptions about the nation's nuclear arsenal that underlay those plans. The United States today has no facility capable of producing either tritium or plutonium detonators for warheads.

With the mothballing of K reactor, Savannah River will have virtually no remaining production functions. Most of the work remaining there will involve cleanup of the wastes and pollution accumulated in more than 40 years of nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union. An era that began with the creation of Savannah River out of rural scrubland—fancifully chronicled by novelist Pat Conroy in "The Prince of Tides"—will come to an end.

In her March 24 announcement, O'Leary pledged \$225 million in economic assistance to cushion the economic blow to the Aiken-Augusta, Ga., area. Incentives for early retirement and the shift of some workers into cleanup operations should cut the number of layoffs from a possible 3,600 to a minimum of 1,200, she said.

Sen. Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.), Savannah River's strongest supporter in Congress, said in a statement that he disagreed with the K reactor decision but added, "I am glad that at least they intend to soften the economic blow," as O'Leary had promised him at a March 23 meeting.

Tritium, Savannah River's most important product since it ceased producing plutonium in the 1980s, decays at a rate of 5.5 percent a year so the nation's stockpile is dwindling. But Watkins and other officials said the nation can recapture enough from dismantled warheads to keep a smaller nuclear arsenal viable until about 2010.

Scientists at the Los Alamos National Laboratory are working on a method to produce small amounts of tritium using a particle accelerator, rather than a nuclear reactor, to meet demand beyond that time.

In addition to the \$1.5 billion spent on K reactor upgrades, the Energy Department spent \$75 million to build a cooling water tower to end the discharge of heated K reactor water into nearby streams. That tower is complete but will never be used.

John Tuck, who as energy under-

secretary oversaw the nuclear weapons complex for Watkins, said it would be unfair to think of the money as wasted. "If you are going to criticize decisions," he said, "you have to take into account when they were made," before the collapse of the Soviet Union.