

LES on track with enrichment plant



KIMBERLY RYAN/NEWS-SUN

Rod Krich of Louisiana Energy Services stands by a container formerly used for storing enriched uranium on display at the consortium's Hobbs office. The energy of the container's product is equivalent to a supertanker of oil or 300,000 tons of coal.

■ Executives review progress since company announced intentions

RICHARD TROUT
NEWS-SUN

Belief is a strong force, almost as strong as love. If someone believes in something strong enough, it's likely to come true.

"I believe it's going to happen. I really do," said Marshall Cohen, vice president of communications for Louisiana Energy Services.

The concept Cohen is trying so hard to move from idea to reality is simply the possession of a license. LES needs to receive a license from the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission to build a \$1.8 billion uranium enrichment plant five miles east of Eunice.

According to Cohen, LES president Jim Ferland and Rod Krich, vice president of safety, licensing and nuclear engineering, the reality of a license is beginning to come into sharper focus. To hear them say it, LES is right on track to receiving permission to build the country's first enrichment plant using centrifuge technology.

Ferland said the consortium might even be two months ahead of schedule.

"We're happy with where we are; we're certainly on track to slightly ahead," he said about a process that started with LES's September 2003 announcement it planned to build a plant in Lea County.

The target date for starting construction has been moved up two-three months — to August 2006 — in anticipation of having the required license, permits and financing in place by then. The first cascade is expected to be ready for production around the end of 2008. A cascade is a group of high-speed uranium enrichment centrifuges.

Over the next four years the plant's production would be increased until it reaches full output by 2013.

"There's three primary legs we're working on — licensing, construction readiness and financing, and all of those are in motion now," Ferland said.

A lot will begin to happen as LES shifts more of its attention on the construction process in 2005, Cohen said.

"Everything is just coming together tremendously well," he said. "With the partnership we have with Lea County, it can't go wrong."



A contentious year

LES is proposing to use a high-speed centrifuge plant at its National Enrichment Facility. Centrifuge technology is more efficient and less expensive than gaseous diffusion, according to LES.

There is a gaseous diffusion plant currently operating in Paducah, Ky. Another gaseous diffusion plant in Portsmouth, Ohio, has been closed for several years.

LES went through a five-day hearing process in early February regarding four environmental contentions Washington, D.C.-based Nuclear Information and Resource Service and Public Citizen had submitted to the NRC. The hearings before the Atomic Safety and Licensing Board looked at the plant's impacts on several issues including ground and surface water, water supplies, the storage and deconversion of uranium byproduct and the need for the plant.

The licensing board said it will release its conclusions on the four contentions in early June. The board will conduct hearings this fall on six other contentions primarily dealing with safety issues. Contentions from the state Environment Department and attorney general will be discussed in addition to contentions from the two Washington groups.

Questions NIRS and Public Citizen raised during the hearings included whether fractures in the red bed clay beneath the LES

Louisiana Energy Services president Jim Ferland said all of the consortium's top officers would work on site at the plant once it begins production, and that most of them would start working near Eunice when construction starts in August 2006.

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