

# Uranium plant may find a home in Eunice

By Peter Barnes  
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EUNICE — Like many others in this former boomtown, Mayor James Brown knows more about isotopes, centrifuges and uranium-235 than your average college student.

Brown's recent crash course in nuclear physics was a prerequisite: Many of his constituents are counting on the jobs and economic trickle-down being promised if a \$1.3 billion uranium enrichment plant that would make fuel for nuclear power plants comes to town.

Critics say the proposed National Enrichment Facility could pollute the environment, guzzle scarce water, and leave this oil-producing town with tons of radioactive waste and nowhere to put it.

But the mayor warns that without the plant, Eunice faces extinction.

"We have to have something else in place or communities like Eunice and Jal will just disappear," he said. "The oil industry won't be able to support our economy 20 or 30 years from now."

The project would be the first privately operated uranium enrichment plant in the United States and the first U.S. installation to use centrifuge technology, rather than gaseous diffusion that has been around since the Manhattan Project.



Kimberly Ryan/Hobbs News-Sun via AP

**The proposed National Enrichment Facility, which would make fuel for nuclear power plants, would sit on this parcel of land near Eunice. Many residents in southeastern New Mexico are counting on the economic boost being promised if the plant is built. Others, however, worry about damage to the environment.**

Louisiana Energy Services, the international consortium behind the plant, wanted the project in rural Louisiana, but backed out in 1998 after opponents accused it of targeting a predominantly poor and black parish. Then it pulled out of Hartsville, Tenn., in 2003 after running into opposition from former Vice President Al Gore and others.

The new proposed site is in the flat, scrub-covered desert 340 miles from Albuquerque in the southeastern corner of the state, close to the Texas state line. The consortium has promised the plant would employ 400 workers during the construction phase and, once it is up and running, 210 people, with a payroll of more than \$10 million and an average salary of \$50,000.

Last week, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Atomic Safety and Licensing Board held public meetings on the consortium's plan.

At one, Lea County Commissioner Darrold Stephenson made his point by flipping the lights off. If the project is turned down, "this is what we're passing on to our future generations: nothing," the 70-year-old commissioner said later.

Oil and natural gas have been the region's lifeblood for decades. Today, bobbing oil pumps and high-pressure gas lines are woven into Eunice's modest street grid.

But many oil-related jobs are disappearing because of new labor-saving technology, and companies have discovered more lucrative oil fields elsewhere. Since 1985, Eunice's population has fallen by a third, to 2,500.

The uranium enrichment plant would be the biggest commercial nuclear project in the United States in years. The nuclear industry is watching the project's fate closely, said Marshall Cohen, a consortium spokesman.

"If it's a good, steady, on-track process, that's encouraging to others who might want to look at nuclear-related construction. Because it's very expensive — the amount of money spent on obtaining the li-

cense is serious money," he said.

Townspeople in Eunice overwhelmingly support the project. Some have grown tired of environmentalists and other out-of-townners preaching doom, and

many note they have lived with industrial hazards all their lives.

"Don't tell me how dangerous this is, when I grew up in this oil field," said Fay Thompson, owner of The Bakery and More restaurant

on Main Street. Compared with working with oil, the plant is a "walk in the park," Thompson said.

She said her husband died 40 years ago of cancer related to benzene, a petroleum byproduct.

Still, a few in town are skeptical. "We're such a gullible lot here, what can I say?" said Rose Gardner, owner of Desert Rose Flowers and Gifts. "The whole world knows the negative side, but Lea County doesn't seem to know it."

Environmentalists worry radioactive material could seep into the groundwater and the air. Moreover, they say, uranium processing generates a type of waste that cannot be dumped anywhere in the United States. After processing, it could be sent to a low-level nuclear waste dump.

No U.S. processing facility can do that. A French company has offered to build such a plant in this country, but it will be years before it applies for a license.

Gov. Bill Richardson, who was energy secretary in the Clinton administration, has indicated his support for the project is contingent on assurances the waste will be sent out of state.

Mike Sheehan, an economist hired by Nuclear Information and Resource Service, an anti-nuclear group, also said the new plant would financially undercut an anti-proliferation program in Russia that takes weapons-grade uranium and turns it into power plant fuel.

Other critics point out the United States discourages the same kind of plants in places such as Iran, which might use it to produce uranium for nuclear weapons.