Study begins for NM uranium deconversion plant

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The first step has been taken toward a uranium deconversion plant in Lea County in southeastern New Mexico.

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission on Thursday held the first of several public meetings on an environmental impact statement for the International Isotopes Inc. nuclear deconversion facility proposed for a site about 14 miles west of Hobbs.

In April, Louisiana Energy Services and International Isotopes agreed International Isotopes will provide uranium deconversion services for the LES' National Enrichment Facility, which will produce enriched uranium for commercial nuclear power plants. The LES plant is being built near Eunice.

The $3 billion enrichment facility also will produce tons of depleted uranium tails each year, which Idaho-based International Isotopes will use in its proposed facility. The facility would deconvert uranium tails and simultaneously extract fluorine gases that could be sold to be used in manufacturing solar panels, computer screens and medical equipment.

The soonest International Isotopes could break ground on its facility is early 2012, said NRC's licensing project manager, Matt Bartlett.

Bartlett told the Lea County public meeting the International Isotopes facility will not be a nuclear facility in that the process will be a chemical one. But he said the NRC has oversight because uranium tails are involved.

The NRC received the company's application last December, and after a 45-day acceptance review, is now formally reviewing it.

"That is an 18-month formal review," Bartlett said. "Running in parallel we have the environmental impact statement, which typically takes 24 months."

A safety review will look at such factors as radiation, chemical, fire, seismic and security issues, while the environmental review will study air, water, soils and plants, public health, historical and archaeological property and artifacts and environmental justice.

About a dozen citizens and elected officials attended Thursday's meeting, and expressed support for the project.

"We feel very comfortable with the project and our new corporate citizen," said Lea County Commissioner Gary Schubert. "The citizens of Lea County are supportive of this opportunity."

Hobbs Mayor Gary Don Reagan said he could think of no better project than the International Isotopes facility because it complements the uranium enrichment project.

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