Nuclear Weapons Plant to Improve Fire Safety

AMARILLO, Texas (AP) — Pantex, the country's only nuclear weapons assembly and disassembly plant, has completed main construction on a $35 million project that is designed to improve fire protection at the facility.

The new construction comes after the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board raised safety concerns earlier this year about more than a decade of delays in completing improvements to an aging fire protection system at the West Texas facility, the Amarillo Globe-News reported [1] Sunday.

"Continued failures, if not addressed, could lead to non-availability of the fire protection systems during normal operations and accident conditions involving special nuclear material," the congressional nuclear watchdog agency said in a special report. "Thus failures of the fire protection system pose a risk to worker and public health and safety."

Officials with B&W Pantex, the plant contractor, said the new construction project included replacing 16,000 feet of main pipes and pumps and having workers build more water holding tanks.

"B&W Pantex is working diligently to maintain and upgrade aging facilities and infrastructure to ensure we continue to accomplish our mission," B&W Pantex General Manager John Woolery said. "We are absolutely committed to maintaining the safety of our employees, our facilities and the critical work we do at Pantex."

Neile Miller, former acting administrator at the National Nuclear Security Administration, said in a May 30 letter to the board that designs for an upgraded flame detection system are 90 percent complete and installation should begin in September.

"Protection of the public, workers and the environment is paramount in everything we do at Pantex," Miller wrote in the letter.

In recent years, B&W Pantex has replaced 17,850 feet of iron piping with high-density polyethylene pipes and poured millions of dollars into the fire system.

When activated, the plant's deluge systems are designed to pump thousands of gallons of water into assembly cells or other weapons facilities, putting out the threat of fire or explosion.

A Feb. 13 electrical fire at the Pantex plant shut down all classified and unclassified computer systems at the site, temporarily halting nuclear weapons work. Officials determined the fire began in a new breaker box that had been installed last year.

Pantex, located about 17 miles northeast of Amarillo, dismantles retired nuclear bombs and modifies weapons for the U.S. atomic arsenal.

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Information from: Amarillo Globe-News, http://www.amarillo.com [2]

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