

WEAPONS COMPLEX

MORNING
BRIEFING■ **2 EM data center solicitations expected this fall**

ARLINGTON, VA. -- Two Department of Energy cleanup properties are expected to issue solicitations for artificial intelligence (AI)-related data centers soon, federal officials said here Wednesday.

The Oak Ridge Site in Tennessee could issue a request for proposals in early November for a potential data center, said Rob Seifert, director of infrastructure disposition and regulatory policy for DOE, said during a panel discussion at the National Cleanup Workshop.

Likewise, the Paducah Site in Kentucky expects to issue a solicitation "this fall," Seifert said at the annual DOE conference. The gathering is hosted by Energy Communities Alliance and Energy Facility Contractors Group.

The Paducah Site has up to 700 acres available while the Oak Ridge Site has more than 250 acres available, split between the DOE Office of Environmental Management, Office of Science and Oak Ridge National Laboratory, Seifert said.

DOE's push to develop data centers, hopefully powered by small modular reactors or other advanced nuclear projects. Seifert and [Neelesh Nerurkar](#), acting principal deputy director and director of infrastructure policy, discussed the DOE perspective during the panel.

DOE's Idaho National Laboratory has [already requested data center applications](#) at its property and it has an industry day scheduled for Friday Sept. 26.

Savannah River Site in South Carolina is also expected to move forward with a solicitation in the near term, the DOE officials said.

■ **Updated Sentinel acquisition strategy in Works, EMD approval seen in 2027**

This fall, the Defense Department may approve an updated acquisition strategy for the Northrop Grumman LGM-35A Sentinel future ICBM before a possible re-approval of the program for engineering and manufacturing development (EMD) by early to mid-2027.

"We are definitely making sure we get the restructure of the program right," Brig. Gen. William Rogers, program executive officer for intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), said Monday at the Air & Space Forces Association's Air, Space & Cyber Conference. The gathering is being held at the Gaylord National Resort and Convention Center. "We are really looking, based on the analysis, to early-to-mid 2027."

Air Force Secretary Troy Meink has said that he has spent considerable time considering the restructuring of the program since taking the helm of the Department of the Air Force in May.

"I am much more confident of the [Sentinel] program than when I first got in the job," Meink told reporters on Monday. "We also have to remember this is probably one of the largest public works programs since we did the last ICBM fielding."

There will be 659 Sentinel missiles – including 25 test – to replace 450 Boeing Minuteman IIIs – 400 deployed and 50 reserve – fielded in the 1970s.

Acting Air Force acquisition chief William Bailey, who also serves as the director of the Air Force Rapid



Capabilities Office, said that "while this [restructuring] is going on, the work continues on the program" and that "we've had plenty of time working out with industry as to what the scope is and how we get that done."

Bailey said that "we have frequent interactions" with Pentagon acquisition boss Michael Duffey. Duffey would be responsible for the necessary re-approval of EMD, which DoD first gave in 2020 but then [rescinded](#) last year after a critical Nunn-McCurdy unit cost breach. Then-Air Force acquisition chief Andrew Hunter said it would take 18 to 24 months to develop a new Sentinel acquisition program baseline and restructure the program.

Nevertheless, the Air Force said that it has continued work on the Sentinel missile, including its command and launch systems, and the wing command centers, while initially pausing launch silo and launch center infrastructure work.

"With the launch silos and launch centers, we've turned Northrop back on on the concept design work," Rogers said.

Northrop Grumman said on Tuesday that it has tested "every segment of Sentinel, including recent static fire qualification tests on Stage 1 and Stage 2 segments."

"We've resumed silo design work and made progress designing and testing support equipment," the company said. "We will continue to work closely with the Air Force to restructure the program to meet the Air Force's cost and schedule requirements."

Initial operational capability for Sentinel was May 2029, but that has shifted to the end of 2033.

Exchange Monitor affiliate Defense Daily first published a version of this story.

■ **Markey questions EnergySec Wright over ties with Oklo**

Sen. Edward Markey (D-Mass.) said this week a potential conflict of interest exists between Energy Secretary Chris Wright and Oklo, a company where Wright previously served on the board of directors.

Markey, a frequent nuclear critic, voiced his concerns to President Donald Trump in a [letter](#) Tuesday. Markey posed several questions to the White House and requested a response by Sept. 30.

Wright formerly served as a board member of the Santa Clara, Calif.-based advanced nuclear technology company prior to his confirmation as secretary of energy in [February](#).

The letter comes after the Department of Energy supported Oklo's [1.68 billion recycling facility](#) in Oak Ridge, Tenn. and in talks of plans to transfer plutonium to the company for commercial use, which Markey mentioned in the letter.

"I am concerned that your [Trump's] administration is moving forward with plans to transfer plutonium to Oklo and allow it to build a reprocessing plant not because these proposals make sense for the United States, but because Oklo stands to benefit financially and Secretary Wright is acting in his former company's interest," Markey said in the letter.

DOE emailed a statement to *Exchange Monitor* addressing Markey's letter.

"Secretary Wright remains compliant with all ethics and financial disclosure requirements," DOE said. "Part of that process included the divestment of assets and resignation of board positions that may appear to present a conflict of interest," a DOE spokesperson said. "While the secretary did resign from the Oklo board upon assuming the position of energy secretary, he has never and does not currently own any financial stake in Oklo."

Oklo declined to comment, when contacted by *Exchange Monitor*.

■ **Acting EM chief Bradburne reiterates commitment to vitrification plant**

ARLINGTON, VA -- The new acting head of the Department of Energy's nuclear cleanup branch reiterated here Wednesday the department remains committed to start making glass in mid-October from the radioactive tank waste at the Hanford Site in Washington state.

Following his address to the National Cleanup Workshop, Joel Bradburne, [acting assistant secretary](#) for DOE's Office of Environmental Management, told *Exchange Monitor* he expects initial operation of the Waste Treatment and Immobilization Plant (WTP) by the current Oct. 15 deadline.

When then asked if he was still confident of October operation in the event of a federal government shutdown, Bradburne simply said "we have been through government shutdowns before." The EM official added that he always plans for the worst and hopes for the best.

Sources had previously told the *Monitor* and other publications this month that Secretary of Energy Chris Wright was getting cold feet on the long-awaited vitrification plant and that was the reason for the termination of acting EM head Roger Jarrell.

“It’s not the first leadership transition for EM,” Bradburne said during his presentation. “It won’t be the last.” Bradburne also noted that the cleanup office is awaiting full Senate confirmation of Tim Walsh.

Walsh has been approved by committee but has yet to be voted upon by the Senate. Sen. Patty Murry (D-Wash.) recently placed a hold on Walsh’s nomination, citing uncertainty of the administration’s commitment to WTP. Walsh a real estate developer and combat veteran who President Donald Trump nominated to head EM in March.

As for Bradburne, he has been around the nuclear weapons complex for decades, most recently as manager of the Portsmouth-Paducah Project Office. “Coming from the field I know what it’s like to run a site and live in the neighborhood,” Bradburne said.

Another morning speaker, the mayor of West Richland, Wash., Brent Gerry, said because of the 56 million gallons of radioactive and hazardous sludge at Hanford, DOE must use both glass-making and solidifying waste into a concrete-like grout.

“Both can run in tandem ... for decades,” because of the high volume, Gerry said.

The conference is held annually by DOE and hosted by Energy Communities Alliance and the Energy Facility Contractors Group.

■ **Orano and Zeno to partner up bolster americium-241 production through fuel recycling**

Orano and Zeno Power have agreed to partner to secure a supply chain of [americium-241](#) from Orano’s spent nuclear fuel recycling operations in France.

Through the agreement, Zeno will make a multi-million-dollar investment to gain priority access to large quantities of americium-241 annually from Orano’s [la Hague used fuel treatment and recycling site](#) in Normandy, France, according to Orano’s Wednesday press release.

[Zeno](#) is a privately held company, with offices in Washington, D.C. and Seattle, that develops radioisotope power systems (RPS) that convert recycled nuclear materials into batteries. It will use americium-241 secured from Orano’s fuel recycling for its space nuclear batteries, according to the release.

With the agreement, Zeno said it also hopes to advance its broader strategy to build a strong nuclear fuel supply chain.

The agreement builds on the partnership between Orano and Zeno, Orano said. The two companies explored industrial production of americium-241 powder at the la Hague site in 2022.

The partnership set forth a feasibility study to evaluate economic, logistical and technical pathways.

“Our work with Zeno demonstrates one of the significant values of recycling used nuclear fuel,” Orano’s recycling business unit’s senior executive vice president Corinne Spilios said in the release. “This agreement once again demonstrates the value of recycling recoverable nuclear materials, which allows for energy production while conserving natural resources”.

Americium-241 is a long-lived isotope that can produce gamma radiation. The isotope’s use ranges from smoke detectors and industrial applications to space power systems.

Zeno is also currently [developing](#) an americium-fueled RPS for NASA to power lunar rovers, landers and infrastructure on the Moon, according to the release.

■ **Los Alamos needs more transparency with tritium venting, enviros say**

The National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) and its Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) failed to provide “real-time monitoring data” on its radioactive tritium venting to the local community, local environmentalist groups said this week.

A [Sept. 18 statement](#) by Communities for Clean Water (CCW), a coalition of organizations in Los Alamos that includes Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety, said NNSA and Los Alamos were “dismissing community

concerns with contradictory and incomplete statements” that “disregard” statements by independent experts and DOE legal obligations.

“How can our communities be expected to trust LANL when they won’t give us access to the raw, real-time monitoring data – independently verified by the EPA,” Joni Arends from Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety said in the statement.

The CCW said the public has no form of a real-time monitoring dashboard from NNSA but instead relies on “piecemeal updates” from the New Mexico Environmental Department. The statement also said LANL dismissed public health concerns with “vague reassurances, not real information,” scheduled venting during Pueblo harvest season “when outdoor cultural events, youth programs, and farming are in full swing” – though CCW admitted LANL avoided Pueblo Feast Days – and did not disclose how weather patterns such as wind, humidity and rain could impact venting and release of tritium.

“Without this transparency, LANL is continuing a legacy of empty assurances, not accountability,” Arends continued.

As of [Sept. 21](#), NNSA said tritium venting is complete on two of four flanged waste containers at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. A flanged tritium waste container (FTWC) is a stainless-steel vessel meant for long-term storage of tritium-contaminated waste, according to DOE, and tritium venting is controlled release of tritium from the containers to relieve pressure buildup.

[Despite some concerns](#) with how the waste has been handled at Los Alamos over time, and criticism from [anti-nuclear organizations](#) on tritium venting, the New Mexico Environment Department granted NNSA and contractor Triad National Security a 180-day temporary authorization that runs through March 2026. The state department concluded the risk of the venting was less than the risk of doing nothing. A past DOE audit found that before the containers could be moved from their current site, tritium venting would be needed.

“NNSA and LANL committed to the New Mexico Environment Department, to the public and to our tribal neighbors that we be transparent and communicative regarding depressurization of these containers. We have done that,” a spokesperson for LANL said in an email to the *Exchange Monitor*. “We communicated when we would start operations and have provided daily updates, several updates in a day when necessary. We’re proud of the professionalism, safety and commitment of the team conducting the operation and are looking forward to finally shipping these containers offsite.”

■ SRS, EPA officials not too worried about radioactive wasp nests

Environmental health officials reemphasized Tuesday that the [radioactive wasp issue](#) at the Department of Energy's Savannah River Site, one that made national headlines last month, is not currently considered a concern to the public.

During a bimonthly meeting with the SRS Citizens Advisory Board (CAB), site officials fielded questions about the July 3 discovery of a wasp nest in one of the tank farms at the 310-square-mile site near Aiken, S.C. Since then, at least three other nests have been discovered. Each nest was treated with insecticide and disposed of.

Board member Marty Ball voiced concerns about potential spread of radioactivity, including the trace levels of cesium found in the nests. But Gene Rhodes, the director of the Savannah River Ecology Lab (SREL), said the cesium is coming from the water around the tank farm, rather than the wood being used to build the nests. He added that he did a walkthrough in the farms and said he did not find anything too concerning.

"Everything needed to make those nests are right there in the tank farms," Rhodes said. "I'm not seeing any evidence that there's anything more than what's already in the tanks."

Rhodes said his team is doing a study to determine if trees surrounding the tanks have been contaminated. If not, there is no concern to the public, as long as the materials and nests are confined within the tank farm.

"I don't see that being anything other than a very localized problem," Rhodes said.

Other CAB members questioned the potential impacts among wildlife around the site were to eat the wasps. Jon Richards, a human health risk assessor with EPA, said the spread of radioactivity to wildlife is something EPA monitors. To date, there have been no alarming discoveries.

"It's a whole ecosystem and we have risk assessors who monitor that," Richards said.

SRS is home to two tank farms that house a total of 51 underground waste storage tanks. The 43 tanks that have not yet been operationally closed hold more than 35 million gallons of waste. Rhodes said that the wasp nest issue will take care of itself as workers close more tanks.

■ WIPP poised to hit shipment target for fiscal year

ARLINGTON, VA -- The Department of Energy's Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (WIPP) near Carlsbad, N.M., expects to meet its fiscal 2025 target of receiving 425 shipments of transuranic waste within days, a DOE manager said here Wednesday.

As of this week, WIPP has received 419 shipments of defense-related transuranic waste from across the weapons complex, said Mark Bollinger, manager of DOE's Carlsbad Field Office. The salt mine should hit the 425 mark within the next week, Bollinger said.

Bollinger made his comments during a presentation at DOE's National Cleanup Workshop. The conference is hosted annually by the Energy Communities Alliance and the Energy Facility Contractors Group. Fiscal 2025 ends Sept. 30.

WIPP is the nation's only underground disposal site for defense-related transuranic waste. In August it [received 55 shipments](#).

"The complex down in the desert is aging," Bollinger said, adding some WIPP infrastructure projects are nearing completion. The waste disposal site this week announced completion of the rebuild of its [underground "salt pocket,"](#) a metal cage where salt is stored until it is hoisted to the surface.

WIPP is also reaching a similar point with its [utility ventilation shaft](#), according to Bollinger.

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