

GE Hitachi clears key hurdle in nuke expansion

Regulators OK test facility for uranium enrichment

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GE Hitachi Nuclear Energy got past an important hurdle Tuesday on its way toward building and operating a commercial uranium enrichment plant at its Castle Hayne headquarters campus.

The U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission approved a request by a unit of GE Hitachi to operate a test loop for its laser enrichment technology.

The uranium enrichment plant is a big part of a huge expansion of GE Hitachi's operations here.

Gov. Mike Easley on April 30 announced that GE Hitachi would receive \$35.7 million in state and local funds toward its planned expansion. In return, GE Hitachi pledged to create hundreds of jobs here. New Hanover County previously had approved incentives as well.

Global Laser Enrichment (GLE), a subsidiary of GE Hitachi, will use information gained from the test loop to make a final decision on construction of the commercial facility as early as the beginning of next year, GE Hitachi said in a news release.

Nuclear regulators must also approve construction and operation of the commercial plant.

"Thus far, the licensing process has progressed smoothly," said Tammy Orr, president and CEO of GLE. "We are working on a commercial facility license for the Wilmington site for submittal later this year," she said in a statement.

The test loop is being built in the nuclear fuel manufacturing facility operated by Global Nuclear Fuel-Americas LLC, which is located on GE Hitachi 1,300-acre headquarters site.

With construction of the test facility nearly complete, GLE said it expects to begin installation of test loop equipment -- lasers, gas-handling equipment and auxiliary systems -- in the near future.

The test loop will help advance the design of the commercial uranium enrichment building, equipment and processes.

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