

GE uranium enrichment plans raise fears: report

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The Exelon Byron Nuclear Generating Stations in Byron, Illinois. US conglomerate General Electric is seeking permission to build a \$1 billion plant for uranium enrichment by laser, a process which has raised proliferation fears, The New York Times said.

US conglomerate General Electric is seeking permission to build a \$1 billion plant for uranium enrichment by laser, a process which has raised proliferation fears, The New York Times said Sunday.

After testing the enrichment process for two years, GE has asked the US government to approve its plans for a massive facility in North Carolina that could produce reactor fuel by the ton, the report said, citing GE officials.

"We are currently optimizing the design," Christopher Monetta,

president of Global Laser Enrichment, a subsidiary operated by GE and Japan's Hitachi, said in an interview with the newspaper.

The US [Nuclear Regulatory Commission](#) is expected to deliver its decision on whether to issue a commercial license for the complex by next year, the report said.

Uranium enrichment can be used to produce both the fuel for a [nuclear reactor](#) and the fissile material for an atomic warhead. New technologies are seen as potentially dangerous as they make it easier to build a bomb.

Monetta said the plant could enrich enough uranium each year to fuel up to 60 large [reactors](#) -- in theory, enough to power 42 million homes, or a third of all homes in the United States.

Donald Kerr, a former director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory who was recently briefed on GE's advance, said laser enrichment "appears to be close to a real industrial process" and a genuine [technological breakthrough](#).

But critics say the technology could be co-opted by rogue states such as Iran or terror groups and used in the covert production of weapons, as it would be more difficult to detect small laser-equipped facilities.

"We're on the verge of a new route to the bomb," Frank von Hippel, a [nuclear physicist](#) who advised former US president Bill Clinton and now teaches at Princeton University, told the Times.

"We should have learned enough by now to do an assessment before we let this kind of thing out."

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