

# US panel approves uranium enrichment plant (Update)

September 25 2012, by Emery P. Dalesio

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(AP)—A nuclear power partnership of General Electric Co. and Tokyo-based Hitachi Ltd. received federal approval Tuesday to build the first plant to enrich uranium for use in commercial reactors using a classified laser technology.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission issued a license to General Electric-Hitachi Global Laser Enrichment LLC to build and operate a uranium enrichment plant near Wilmington deploying the laser technology instead of costlier centrifuges.

Nuclear weapons control advocates fear that allowing companies to use the cheaper and easier technology could increase the risk it falls into the wrong hands.

"We think the approval of the license was done without due consideration of proliferation," said Edwin Lyman, a senior scientist in the global security program of the Union of Concerned Scientists.

"We're already grappling with how to cope with Iran's nuclear enrichment capability" and the laser technology "could make the problem intractable and uncontrollable."

GE Hitachi said it hasn't yet decided whether the project will be profitable enough to launch construction of the \$1 billion plant. Part of the evaluation will be weighing whether markets for enriched uranium will hold for years into the future, spokesman Christopher White said.

But the company assured its hold on the classified technology proposed by the Australian company Silex Systems is secure.

"The company has worked with the NRC, the U.S. departments of State and Energy and independent non-proliferation experts for several years to ensure the security of this technology and has met—and in many cases exceeded—all regulations pertaining to safeguarding this technology," GE Hitachi Nuclear Energy said in a statement.

The NRC license allows GE Hitachi to enrich uranium to 8 percent by weight. Uranium is enriched to 90 percent purity to build atomic bombs.

The United States and five other world powers have imposed sanctions on Iran because it has enriched uranium to 20 percent, a level that could be turned into weapons-grade material much more quickly than power-plant fuel.

The technology could enhance America's energy security because a majority of enriched uranium made to fuel the country's 104 operating nuclear reactors comes from foreign or government-aided sources, the company said.

"It could provide a steady supply of uranium enriched right here in the U.S. to the country's nuclear reactors," Global Laser Enrichment chief executive officer Chris Monetta said. "These reactors provide approximately 20 percent of the nation's electricity today and will continue to be an important part of the energy mix for decades to come."

The NRC said it would conduct inspections during the plant's construction and operation and hold a public meeting in Wilmington before construction begins to explain its oversight plans.

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