

NTS - Device Assembly Facility

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a recent AP story...

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NEARLY COMPLETED NUCLEAR TEST SITE IN NEED OF MISSION
A moratorium killed its intended purpose.
But the government wants the \$100 million structure used.
By Robert Macy -- ASSOCIATED PRESS
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MERCURY, Nev. -- The gleaming, high-tech fortress jutting from the windswept hillside is a costly reminder of an era when the United States engaged the Soviet Union in a game of nuclear brinkmanship.

The Device Assembly Facility, conceived in the Cold War chill of the Reagan years, is a \$100 million plant with nothing to produce.

It stands in stark contrast to the decaying buildings scattered around it at the remote Nevada Test Site, one-time proving ground for America's nuclear arsenal.

Designed to assemble 40 or 50 nuclear weapons a year in what was to be an accelerated testing program, the high-security edifice, the size of two football fields, is about ready for duty.

But there's an even chance the facility will never be used for anything, officials say.

With thick, steel-reinforced concrete walls, the 100,000-square-foot hillside monolith was designed to offer a fail-safe environment for handling one of the world's most dangerous products.

It was in this building 85 miles northwest of Las Vegas that America planned to assemble -- for testing -- deadly new weapons that would challenge the Soviets for dominance into the 21st century.

Yet in the early 1980s, when plans were first drawn for the DAF, no one contemplated a faded red menace and an end to a half-century of nuclear testing.

Now, after an initial outlay of \$100 million and a decade of construction, not to mention an \$8 million annual operating cost, the DAF is searching for a mission.

Department of Energy officials, who cringe at any suggestion the DAF is a white elephant, are busily trying to find a use for the facility when it becomes operational later this year.

The original mission of the DAF faded with the imposition of a nuclear test moratorium in October, 1992. The last of 928 atmospheric and underground nuclear tests at the Nevada site was conducted a month earlier.

"If we had known a moratorium was coming, I doubt we would have ever built the facility," concedes John McGrail, director of the DOE stockpile stewardship program. "The facility was conceived when we were doing 15 to 16 nuclear tests a year. Remember, this was during the Reagan administration, when you had unlimited funds for defense. We had embarked on a policy of spending the Russians into bankruptcy."

Scientists at Lawrence Livermore and Los Alamos -- the national laboratories that designed America's nuclear arsenal -- assembled the last of the weapons in a cluster of aging buildings. The site, known as Area 27, had been in use since the early days of testing, which began in Nevada in 1951.

Faced with growing safety concerns at Area 27, the Energy Department sought funds to build a state-of-the-art building where scientists could assemble up to 50 nuclear-weapons experiments annually.

With the elaborate scientific and security systems built into the DAF, McGrail had hoped the facility could be used to help in

taking apart thousands of nuclear weapons, as called for in the START disarmament treaties.

That work is now being done in Amarillo, Texas, and McGrail doubts any work will be shifted to the DAF because of the political clout of the Texas congressional delegation.

Rick Higgs, DAF facility manager, said the DAF could provide unprecedented safety and security for Los Alamos and Lawrence Livermore in laboratory testing of the nation's existing nuclear inventory.

He says it could provide a staging point for non-nuclear weapons experiments that continue at the test site.

Officials have explored some possible uses with the private sector, but those options are limited because of the narrow focus of the structure's original mission.

McGrail says there is a 50-50 chance the building could be shut down altogether.

Walking down a hospital-clean hallway, Higgs explained the workings of towering assembly-bay buildings and ``Gravel Gerties,'' circular buildings designed for final assembly or disassembly of nuclear weapons.

Named after a 1950s Dick Tracy character, the five ``Gerties'' include a roof of gravel and dirt 21 feet thick that would collapse in the event of a radioactive accident, trapping most of the material.

The facility, which contains more than one million cubic feet of concrete, is ringed by two barbed-wire fences with motion sensors. The only entry is through a double security gate.

Each building is self-contained within the giant structure, with separate air filtration systems and heavy walls with earth fill between them to prevent any explosion short of a nuclear blast from damaging other units.

``In retrospect, it was too large,'' McGrail says. ``It could have been built half as big. In 1983, we were projecting the nuclear weapons program would double in the next 20 years.

``If only we had known the Cold War was going to be won.''

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