



Savannah River Site

Citizens Advisory Board

Recommendation 240

Savannah River Ecology Laboratory - Funding Reductions

Background

The Savannah River Ecology Laboratory (SREL) is a research unit of The University of Georgia (UGA). SREL plays an important part in the remediation activities at the Savannah River Site (SRS) and across the DOE-complex. Environmental Management decisions based in part on SREL's research have saved the Department of Energy (DOE) and taxpayers significant life-cycle costs. For example, a 1994 decision by the DOE not to drain Par Pond on SRS and remove contaminated sediments was based on SREL research that suggested the habitat could survive with the sediment intact. This information saved billions of dollars in cleanup costs. The DOE and its contractors save time and money in environmental risk assessments and regulatory actions by having such information available.

SREL has recently organized its research under three broad themes: Characterization; Ecological Risks and Effects; and Remediation and Restoration. SREL scientists are internationally known for research on remediation and the effects of environmental contamination, restoring degraded habitats, and environmental stewardship. SREL is actively contributing to environmental remediation, restoration efforts, and environmental stewardship on the SRS and elsewhere.

Last year (FY2006), the DOE cut the funding to \$4 million from \$7.78 million, resulting in a staff reduction of approximately 60 personnel at SREL. Recent newspaper articles, report that SREL expected \$4.5 million this year (FY2007) based on discussions with DOE, but DOE officials have cut this amount to \$1 million. Officials at SREL thought an agreement had been worked out to receive the \$4.5 million for FY2007; however, the plan derailed. The DOE has been encouraging SREL to seek other sources of funding from other federal agencies and nonfederal sources to continue their work at SRS. While

SREL has obtained some funding from other sources, in the past the DOE provides the majority of funding. If funding is not restored to \$4.5 million, SREL will close.

Comment

The SRS Citizens Advisory Board (CAB) considers the ecology lab to be a national treasure and an important part of the SRS cleanup efforts and our community. The general public considers SREL to be an independent and credible source of information about environmental issues on the Savannah River Site and elsewhere. The SRS CAB was greatly concerned about the impact of budget cuts last year (Ref. 1). The SRS CAB is extremely disappointed to hear that DOE plans additional SREL funding cuts this year.

The SRS CAB believes that DOE should view funding for the SREL as a long-term investment that will provide payoffs over the life of the cleanup mission in terms reducing risks (to workers, the public, and the environment), costs, and improve effectiveness. This investment is not unlike the Research and Development (R&D) investments made by successful for-profit, private-sector firms, which recognize that R&D is essential to long-term survival and prosperity.

SREL has potential for a strong and useful connection to all DOE-EM sites. However, there is an under appreciation across DOE-EM on the role SREL could provide. SREL should be considered a national ecological laboratory and its services used across the DOE-complex. Since the early 1950's, SREL has compiled an extensive database, documentation and research on radiation ecology and the effects to the environment, specifically related to impacts from nuclear weapons related production. Such information is essential to the operation and closure of all DOE sites.

SREL is recognized as a world leader in radiation ecology and provides unprecedented training for future scientists and engineers in this field. Radiation ecology is a multidisciplinary science that uses nuclear physics, chemistry, biology, toxicology, ecology and risk analyses to predict the effects of radioactive contaminants on humans and the environment. At this time, during a period of nuclear renaissance, the SREL could play a significant role in the training of the next generation of environmental scientists, and support the expanding role of using nuclear power to meet the electrical needs of the United States.

DOE's reduction of funding to \$1 million for SREL would result in its closure. Although SREL researchers would be able to compete for funds from other programs, the physical facilities would likely not be sustainable. Additionally, the amount of competitive funds available from other programs would fall short of previous funds to SREL.

The SRS CAB understood that the SREL mission was redefined and that a new Cooperative Agreement was to be signed between UGA and DOE to provide funding at the \$4.5 million level for FY2007 and future years. The SRS CAB finds it reprehensible that DOE would renege on such an agreement. Finding other sources of funding for the budget shortfall at this late date will be extremely difficult and the SRS CAB original

concerns expressed at the time of last year's budget cuts about significant loss of expertise will be realized. The SRS CAB would support funding the SREL from a variety of resources. For example, DOE-EM already supports activities that could be classified as technology development or R&D in this manner.

Recommendation

The SRS CAB recommends the following:

1. DOE-EM sign the Cooperative Agreement to provide FY2007 funding for SREL at no less than the \$4.5 million level and provide a minimum base level of at least \$4.5 million for subsequent out-years in accordance with the pending Cooperative Agreement.
2. DOE-EM investigate the possibility of permanently establishing the funding for SREL under the authorization of the SRS landlord and the possibility of spreading the SREL funding across resources within the DOE-complex similar to technology development funding. DOE-EM provide a report on the findings of the investigation to the SRS CAB by March 22, 2007.
3. Before any future budget cuts are made to the SREL budget, DOE-SR must notify the SRS CAB as soon as they are aware of any impending budget cuts.

References

1. Citizens Advisory Board Recommendation No. 221 (adopted September 28, 2005), "Loss of Expertise to Support SRS Clean Up."

Agency Responses

[Department of Energy-SR](#)