Piketon stopped enriching uranium twenty years ago. Now the nuclear industry is coming back

The Ohio Newsroom | By Erin Gottsacker

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An aerial view of the Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion Plant, which the U.S. Department of Energy has been cleaning up for more than a decade

A billboard near the former Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion Plant announces in bold letters: "The future is now for PORTS."

The U.S. Department of Energy has spent more than a decade cleaning up this site, decontaminating and decommissioning facilities that were once used to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons during the Cold War.

Two years ago, it finished demolishing one of the largest structures on the site: the X-326 uranium process building covered 56 acres.

Now, new, private, high-tech industries are moving in, building on the site's nuclear legacy.

Back in time at the Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion Plant

Former workers remember the A-Plant, as it was commonly called, as its own tiny town, complete with a fire department and police force, hospital, repair shops and cafeteria.

For decades starting in the '50s, the plant employed thousands of people.

But then the Cold War ended, and [in 2001](#), it stopped operating.

As the Department of Energy started cleaning up nuclear weapons facilities across the country, it tasked community reuse organizations, like the [Southern Ohio Diversification Initiative](#), with figuring out how to use the land next.

"We started way, way back, even before the plant closed to try to do planning and to work out what the next steps would be," said Kevin Shoemaker, SODI's in-house counsel. "But one of the most important things that had to happen was we had to have some guidance as to what the community really wanted to see."

The Fernald site, another former nuclear weapons program site outside of Cincinnati, was converted into [a nature preserve](#), with nuclear waste buried deep beneath its surface.

But most Pike County residents had a different vision for their site, said [Stephanie Howe](#), director of Ohio University's PORTSfuture program, a Department of Energy grant-funded program focused on repurposing the Piketon plant.

> "How can we create a place that employed people for literally decades, how do we leverage that for their future, so that their kids and grandkids have the same opportunities that many of them did?"
>
> Stephanie Howe, Ohio University

In 2010 and 2011, Howe and her team [interviewed local residents, held focus groups, and conducted surveys](#) to figure out exactly what the public wanted for the site's future.

Their answer: jobs, she said, specifically in the nuclear industry.

"We were a little surprised about [that]," she said, "but then not so much because they were used to being part of that nuclear landscape."

And because Piketon has long been part of that landscape, it's well-equipped to handle those industries coming in.

"The infrastructure that's in place at the site, it's just unmatched," Shoemaker said. "At the height of its operation, the facility used more electricity than the city of New York."

What's coming next?

Last fall, Centrus Energy opened [a plant here](#) to enrich uranium again. It's the first U.S. plant to do so in 70 years.

Another company has plans to [open two small nuclear reactors](#) on the site, which could use that enriched uranium to generate power.

And more projects are in the works — one company wants to [produce hydrogen from natural gas](#), and there's a utility-scale battery storage project on the horizon too.

The plan is to create an "integrated energy manufacturing park," Howe said, that engages everyone from unions to students to local community members.

"We're trying to produce decarbonized energy for industry operations, but also for the national grid," she explained. "Everybody's talking about electrifying everything, but just because you plug it in doesn't mean it's clean if the source of that electricity has not been made by a carbon free or a lower carbon energy source."

But not everyone is happy with the new developments.

Local opposition

Vina Colley, a former plant worker and leader of the Piketon Residents for Environmental Safety and Security, expresses concerns about the Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion Plant. She was exposed to radioactive materials there decades ago, and has battled illness ever since.

In March, a coalition of citizen-led organizations organized a meeting to share their concerns.

Some have pacifistic reasons for opposing nuclear power, because of its connection to nuclear weapons.

"We certainly don't want this technology out and around because it's called weapons proliferation," said Pat Marida, a coordinator for the Ohio Nuclear Free Network.

Others, like former A-Plant worker Vina Colley, are concerned about the storage of nuclear waste and whether it's safe for people who live nearby. She's been battling serious illnesses ever since she was exposed to radioactive materials at the plant, and now leads an organization called Piketon Residents for Environmental Safety and Security.

"They're saying it's safe, clean energy," Colley said. "But it's the same thing that we've been doing for 70 years."

Centrus says it's using new technology that's inherently safer than what was used 70 years ago and that reduces the amount of waste generated.

Kevin Shoemaker, with SODI, defends the projects. But he recognizes not all community members will embrace this change.

"There are some people that are going to ask the questions, but they should," he said. "And we welcome that. They should press the folks that are going to be there."

And while nuclear energy isn't without controversy, it's part of the history of this place and it'll be part of its future too.

Erin Gottsacker

Erin Gottsacker is a reporter for The Ohio Newsroom. She most recently reported for WXPR Public Radio in the Northwoods of Wisconsin.