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Final demolition at US uranium enrichment complex

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The last of five buildings making up the US Department of Energy's (DOE's) former Oak Ridge Gaseous Diffusion Plant has been demolished, completing a ten-year program to remove all the former uranium enrichment buildings at the East Tennessee site.



K-27's final wall comes down (Image: DOE-Oakridge)

National, state and local officials joined nearly 1500 employees on 30 August to watch as the final wall of building K-27 was pulled down. Demolition of the four-storey, 383,000 square foot (36,000 square metre) building began in February.

The first gaseous diffusion uranium enrichment facility established at Oak Ridge was K-25, which was built in the early 1940s to supply and produce highly enriched uranium for the Manhattan Project. In 1945, K-25 was the largest building in the world. By 1955 the complex had expanded to include five gaseous diffusion buildings - K-25, K-27, K-29, K-33 and K-31 - and continued to supply highly enriched uranium for US defence programs and low-enriched uranium for civil nuclear power reactors until the mid-1980s.

The final gaseous diffusion enrichment equipment at the plant shut down in August 1985 and the DOE formally terminated enrichment operations at the site in 1987, when it was renamed the East Tennessee Technology Park (ETTP). The DOE's Office of Environmental Management began the work of cleaning up the ETTP site in 1989. Demolition of the K-25, K-29, K-33 and K-31 buildings was completed between 2006 and 2015. The footprint of the demolished K-25 building is now part of the Manhattan Project National Historical Park in Oak Ridge.

The demolition of the last of the former gaseous diffusion enrichment buildings completes Vision 2016, DOE's goal to remove all of the former uranium enrichment buildings at the site by the end of 2016. It also marks the first time a former uranium enrichment complex anywhere in the world has been cleaned and demolished, according to the Oak Ridge Office of Environmental Management.

Cleaned parcels of land are being transferred to the City of Oak Ridge and the Community Reuse Organization of East Tennessee, which are working to transform the site into a private-sector brownfield industrial complex. Oak Ridge Office of Environmental Management manager Sue Cange said completion of Vision 2016 made 300 acres (120 hectares) of land available for future development. "The completion of Vision 2016 sets a standard for what is possible through a dedicated workforce and strong partnerships," she said.

Work will now continue towards the Vision 2020 goal for the entire ETTP site to be cleaned, reindustrialized and transferred to the private sector by 2020.

URS-CH2M Oak Ridge has been DOE's cleanup contractor for the site since 2011.

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