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## **NFS working toward hiring more Unicoi County residents**

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**ERWIN Nuclear Fuel Services is the largest employer in Unicoi County and has some of the better-paying jobs, but there is one statistic people do not find as appealing.**

**Of the more than 700 employees at NFS, only 30 percent of them live in Unicoi County. The number is a concern to the company, and that has spawned an effort by NFS leaders to generate interest among county students about a possible career at the Navy fuel manufacturer. NFS also converts high-enriched uranium into a low-enriched form.**

**County Mayor Greg Lynch, who has heard concerns about the percentage and talked to company officials about it, applauded NFS new effort, which was unveiled Friday when company executives met with guidance counselors from the Unicoi County school system.**

**What they did today was a real good thing to get these kids career-tracked per se because those are good-paying jobs out there, Lynch said. And it would be an opportunity for a lot of kids to live here in Unicoi County and have a good job. A major focus of the meeting was to let educators know what jobs are available and the education level students need. President and Chief Executive Officer Dwight Ferguson said the vast majority of nonsalary jobs require a year of collegelevel chemistry.**

**Were very dependent on people having science and math education, he told counselors. We hire a lot of (people for) engineering and other technical skills. A nuclear safety engineer requires a lot of math, a lot of physics.**

**What were trying to do right here is talk about how can we guide students into what they take as far as being prepared to come to a place like NFS or Eastman and get a job. Thats what the programs going to be about.**

**Ferguson conjectured that fourth grade was a critical year to get students attracted to a field that is available at NFS. He said afterward that availability of technically-trained workers has become a challenge for companies such as NFS and Eastman.**

**Unicoi County has the secondhighest number of NFS employees behind Washington County at 43 percent. Lynch said he hopes Unicoi County residents eventually will hold 50 percent of the jobs.**

**Its not something they can just snap their fingers and fix it overnight, Lynch said. As long as the numbers go up steadily, I dont think we can complain. As far as I know, theyre doing everything they can at Nuclear Fuels to try to get our local people into the work force.**

Ferguson speculated that one reason the percentage of Unicoi County residents who work at NFS fell is the requirement for chemistry or physics, which was adopted about 20 years ago.

Then there was the rise in employees from other counties, began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, said Doug Buck, vice president of human resources.

Especially as we started hiring in 98, 99 time frame, we went from about 150 hourly employees to over 350 hourly employees in less than a two-year period of time, he said. We were hiring left, right and center. So we had to reach out. We actually made a mental decision to go outside the Unicoi County area to get that pool.

NFS started targeting students in the chemical operator program at Northeast State Technical Community College, Buck said. The company also started tapping students coming out of East Tennessee State University's health physics program.

Buck noted that some employees, while they technically lived in another county when they were hired and still do, are actually former Unicoi County residents. While they are not NFS employees, Ferguson noted that a lot of an estimated 250 guards and contractors who have duties at NFS live in the county.

One of the reasons that were doing this is we feel like we ought to be able to hire more people from Unicoi County because in the years that I've been working with the school system, I've been pretty impressed with their performance, Ferguson said.

Buck said he thinks one explanation is county students were not encouraged to take part in the science and math programs in the school system. Ferguson said NFS perhaps should have been more aggressive in urging older students to enter these fields.

According to Buck, the company has devoted most of its time working with younger students on the basics without guiding where those skills are used in the future.