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SPECIAL REPORT: Nuclear Fuel Services, Beyond The Myths

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It's one of the most heavily guarded, highly-regulated companies in the country and it's right in our backyard. Nuclear Fuel Services in Erwin is Unicoi County's largest employer. The facility powers all of the United States Navy's submarines and most of its aircraft carriers. It also fuels many rumors about what happens at the plant and its effects on the community.

For decades, people have wondered exactly what happens behind the plant's barbed wire fences and gun-toting guards. With the word nuclear in its name, NFS garners plenty of negative publicity. The company says undeservedly so.

"One of the misconceptions about NFS is that nuclear warheads may be coming to the plant to be downblended, that's absolutely untrue," NFS Spokesperson Tony Treadway said.

Treadway says the company takes highly-enriched uranium and downblends it to a form of low-enriched fuel that can be used to make electricity. The material that comes into the plant is heavily guarded to protect it from a select few.

"It would be more useful if you had the capabilities to use it in the construction in a very sophisticated, very complicated form of nuclear weapon, which only a few countries in the world possess that capability," Treadway said.

In the end, NFS says it turns the uranium it collects into a material that has no value to terrorists. That said, Treadway says there is little risk for danger at the facility.

With unescorted clearance at NFS, Erwin Fire Chief/Fire Marshal Doc Bailey agrees. "They're probably one of the safest facilities out of all of the places I have inspected," Bailey said.

Bailey dispels the myth that there could be a nuclear explosion at the plant. He also says there's little to no health impact for people who live nearby. Bailey's children play across the street every day.

"If I had any concerns whatsoever, I'm not going to allow my two children, who I love more than anything in this world, spend time across the street from that facility," Bailey said.

A recent U.S. government report concluded the biggest risk at NFS is a one in 85 million chance of getting cancer from the plant. That means people have a better chance of getting struck by lightning, but what about the remnants of what's in the ground there from decades ago?

NFS admits at one time, the ground was contaminated with plutonium from the 1970's as well as uranium.

"While there was some contamination in the area immediately around the plant, none of it impacted the public drinking water," Treadway said.

The company says 95% of those contaminated sites have now been cleaned up. NFS says the remaining 5% will also be contamination-free by the end of this year."

NFS says it is shipping all of its remaining contaminated material out west. Despite past contamination at the plant, NFS says even if you lived at the fence of the plant, you'd get more radiation from watching television during a year than you would from NFS.

"What it's doing to fuel more clean energy produced through nuclear power far outweighs any kind of risk it has to the environment or the public in UnicoiCounty," Treadway said.

NFS is regulated on the local, state, and federal level. In fact, two Nuclear Regulatory Commission resident inspectors are on-site daily.