

Australian firm could build GE uranium facilities in Wilmington

Australia is at last looking at all parts of its uranium business to provide full service.

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GE Energy has signed a deal with an Australian company to license its uranium enrichment technology and possibly develop manufacturing facilities in Wilmington.

Atlanta-based GE Energy's agreement with Silex Systems Limited calls for "a phased approach" to the development of the technology. GE Energy potentially could build a test loop, pilot plant and a full-scale, commercial enrichment facility.

These facilities would be built at GE's existing nuclear energy headquarters in Wilmington "or another suitable location in the United States," the company said.

Financial terms of the deal were not disclosed.

Sydney-based Silex's technology represents a new, laser-based "isotope separation" process for enriching uranium for use in civilian nuclear power plants. It is more efficient than existing civilian fuel enrichment processes such as gas diffusion or gas centrifuge plants. The low-grade enriched uranium will be used for industrial purposes.

"By acquiring the exclusive rights to complete the process development and commercial deployment of Silex's enrichment technology, GE will be in a strong position to support anticipated demands for enriched uranium," Andy White, president and CEO of GE's nuclear business, said in a written statement released Monday.

The transaction is subject to, among other things, governmental approvals and regulatory controls on the design, construction and operation of the process.

The agreement represents an expansion by GE into the global uranium enrichment sector, which is valued at approximately \$5 billion annually.

GE announced in September plans to invest \$78 million to expand and renovate its nuclear and aircraft engine operations in Wilmington. The project is expected to create 200 new jobs and could garner as much as \$3.4 million in state incentives over 10 years.

Gov. Mike Easley granted \$300,000 in One North Carolina Fund incentives for the project, in addition to as much as \$3.1 million in performance-based Job Development Investment Grants.

About 6,000 of GE's 330,000 worldwide employees work in North Carolina, where the company has 20 locations.