

National lab director seeks next generation of nuclear workers

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COLUMBIA — An education pipeline must be in place to train new researchers to succeed those who will be aging out of the nuclear workforce, according to the director of the Savannah River National Laboratory.

“What I’m most concerned about is that we have academic programs that align people in the nuclear sciences. That’s the real challenge,” said director Terry Michalske, during a meeting of the South Carolina Governor’s Nuclear Advisory Council meeting Thursday. “In fact, it’s an assignment I have from the Secretary (of Energy) right now, to assess ‘what does the future look like for our ability to maintain a nuclear science and technology component in this country?’ And that’s probably the thing I’m worried about the most.”

The Aiken County complex doesn’t have difficulty recruiting young PhD graduates, he said, but the field as a whole must prepare the future.

“It is just, ‘Is this the exciting thing you want to go into?’ It’s really important for us to get the students in early, to get interns, post-docs,” said Michalske. “What happens is, once they get in here, they say, ‘This is really challenging and interesting stuff.’ But you wouldn’t know that (because) it just doesn’t seem that interesting.”

The nation’s only complete nuclear material management facility celebrated its 10th year as a national laboratory nearly one year ago.

“In 2008 we had a meeting in Prague where we said, ‘We’re going to get rid of all our nuclear weapons.’ But guess what? It seems to be going the other direction right now,” said Michalske. “The Soviets have doubled their budget for their nuclear program, China, India, who even wants to talk about what is going to happen in the Middle East.”

Savannah River Laboratory started out in 1951, creating the basic materials for nuclear weapons in the Cold War. Then from 1992 to 2004, it was known as the Savannah River Technology Center, focusing on environmental remediation, tritium processing and nonproliferation.

But now the national lab, one of 17 in the U.S. Energy Department, works across an assortment of fields. Fifty-eight percent of its focus has to do with national security, 35 percent to environmental stewardship and 7 percent to clean energy.

Michalske said the lab hired about 80 new employees last year and now has a workforce of 832.

The lab also plays a role in national economic competitiveness, working with companies in 24 states through collaborative research and development projects to share research efforts through personnel, facilities and equipment. Ten companies are in South Carolina.

Aside from environmental remediation, the lab conducts nuclear detection, characterization and assessments, along with nuclear processing and disposition.

“There are a lot people with bad intentions, and there are a lot of materials out there that we’d never want them to get their hands on,” said Michalske.

“Helping our nation and the world do a better job of securing those materials is paramount.”

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