



Ann Harris discusses her experience as a TVA whistle-blower or, as she prefers to be called, a safety advocate

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TVA activist jumps back into fray  
Nuclear power's comeback chills Harris

By ANNE PAINE • Staff Writer • June 30, 2008

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ROCKWOOD, Tenn. — Activists and whistle-blowers who first fought efforts 40 years ago to build nuclear power plants are re-emerging for a new fight as momentum for more reactors grows in what is being called a "nuclear renaissance."

Joining them is a new era of activists, many brought to the anti-nuclear battle from conservation arenas that include solar power and other renewable resources.

One of those returning veteran activists is Ann Harris, the 68-year-old mother of all TVA whistle-blowers, who came forward in the 1980s and 1990s with complaints about what she saw as safety problems at the agency's Watts Bar Nuclear Plant.

Over the years, she has suffered harassment and filed numerous lawsuits against TVA. She also uncovered a document in which the Nuclear Regulatory Commission had agreed to turn names of whistle-blowers over to TVA.

Now, as the move toward more nuclear construction takes hold, her activism is being rekindled. And her message is that nuclear is a problem dressed up as a solution.

"This is not a nuclear renaissance," she said last week, her large frame filling a chair in the living room of her one-story rural home. "This is a nuclear relapse. It's dangerous and it's expensive."

Energy-related documents were stuffed in boxes that lay near photos of children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Books with titles such as Nuclear Waste Disposal Crisis dotted bookshelves.

"The South is targeted to be dumped on," she said.

To be sure, nuclear activity, particularly in the southern United States, is increasing

dramatically. Completion of a second reactor at Watts Bar, about 30 miles from Harris' home between Knoxville and Chattanooga, is under way for \$2.5 billion, on top of billions already spent. TVA and its partners have requested a license to build two nuclear reactors at TVA's Bellefonte site, 20 miles south of Tennessee's border in Alabama.

Utilities around the country have requested dozens of licenses to build plants, and one company is trying to get permission to bring radioactive waste from Italy and possibly elsewhere to Tennessee.

New era, new concerns

Harris is part of a network of individuals and groups that have remained intact but also scaled back over the years, as nuclear construction ended in the face of safety and economic questions two decades ago.

Their concern since then has focused on such issues as the growing amounts of highly radioactive nuclear waste at plants — with no place to dispose of it — as well as controversies at local plants. But that activity was low-key compared with the days when nuclear protests were in full swing.

When a revitalized nuclear industry, along with the Bush administration, began promoting atomic energy as a clean, green energy solution, the alarms sounded.

"The difference now is, there is no visible and recognized threat of nuclear war as the background," said David Freeman, a former TVA director in the late 1970s and early 1980s who voted to scrub new reactor construction because the plants were sinking the agency into deep debt.

"When we had the first nuclear era, everyone was scared to death of total annihilation," he said. "The environmental community is so worried — rightfully — about global warming that they've left the back door open. Nukes are coming in and saying 'I'm here to save you.' "

Joining Harris and the old guard is that new breed of activists, most of them a generation or more removed from the old anti-nuclear days.

"With \$8 billion to \$12 billion or more for a new nuclear reactor, that's money that's not being invested in renewable and other things," said Liz Veazey, director of the Southern Energy Network in Knoxville. "We're really concerned about that investment and nuclear waste."

She works with students and alumni from schools throughout the region, including more than 65 colleges where students have voted to add fees for green projects on campus.

Other organizations, old and new, are ratcheting up as well.

"Last time, it was the Cold War and arms race and recognition that nuclear was making the world much more dangerous," said Mary Olson, with the Nuclear Information and Resource Service in Asheville, N.C. "Now the bigger hammer is climate change. 'It's lonely work'

Ann Harris' cell phone rang frequently Wednesday as she went about her day.

Among the calls was one from a whistle-blower wanting to consult with her on a non-nuclear issue. That kind of call comes more often these days from people she prefers to call

"safety advocates" rather than "whistle-blowers." Their work is not easy, as she knows from her own experiences.

During her whistle-blower days, she reported that equipment in the Watts Bar reactor's control room could not withstand earthquake tremors and that welds were faulty. Over the years, she was shunned and at times threatened.

Workers afraid of reprisals brought their concerns to her and still do. While taking complaints to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the oversight agency for nuclear plants, she began to suspect that TVA was immediately learning who was talking and what they were saying. She discovered a memorandum of understanding in 1993, in which the NRC agreed to report whistle-blowers to TVA. The agreement was rescinded after that.

She settled five harassment complaints against TVA in 1990, arising from its response to her repeated public disclosures to the NRC of safety problems. As part of the settlement, TVA promoted Harris, covered her legal fees and paid her \$75,000, as well as her college tuition. The agency settled again with Harris, in 1998, after she claimed she was fired for her outspokenness.

"It's lonely work," she said.

Life has brought trials

Harris lives in the tree-covered hills of the Cumberland Plateau — about 40 miles from her ancestral home near the Watts Bar plant.

She moved a few years ago to get her family out from downwind of the nuclear plant because of her "knowledge of what radiation can do," she said. It was also a part of an effort to distance herself, literally, from those who felt her advocacy was a threat to TVA and their livelihood, she said.

Last week, she and her husband, Bill — as quiet as she is outspoken — were sitting at a table in the Red Barn Restaurant in Spring City. He wants her to slow down.

"I just say you can't save the whole world," he said.

"I don't want to save the whole world, just my part of it," she responded.

"Most people don't want to be saved anyway," he said. "They just get upset when you get in their pocketbook."

Harris' personal life has been a trial at times. A broken back and crushed bones from an automobile wreck left her in constant pain and reduced her to a shuffling walk. At one point she put away her activism after her son-in-law murdered her daughter. She concentrated her efforts on making sure that he went to prison and that state law was changed to hold an abusing spouse in jail long enough for the partner to seek help.

Then, there was the time the preacher and two leaders of her church she had attended since childhood came to her home and told her it would be "best" if she would worship elsewhere. The controversy that surrounded her had made her unwelcome, she said.

Standing in that church recently, she grew silent for the first time during the long afternoon of talk. Her eyes turned red with tears that pooled without spilling.

"People always assumed I was the problem," she said.

Then, she added: "They don't know how persistent I am."

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#### HOW TO SHARE CONCERNS

Resources for whistle-blowers include:

- We the People, a nuclear worker support group headed by Ann Harris, 1-865-354-4559, apickel@aol.com. She helps guide whistle-blowers in other fields, too.
- TVA's toll-free number for safety or other concerns at its plants is 1-877-866-7840, or go to [www.oigempowerline.com](http://www.oigempowerline.com).

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