

Amarillo may produce bomb triggers

By Betsy Blaney
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Pantex nuclear facility in Amarillo would be the ideal choice for a new site to develop plutonium pits that provide trigger material for nuclear bombs, U.S. Sen John Cornyn said Wednesday.

Several facilities are vying to become home for the Department of Energy's proposed Modern Pit Facility, which would process, manufacture and assemble plutonium pits for use at Pantex.

Pantex is the nation's primary assembly and disassembly plant for nuclear warheads and currently repackages old plutonium pits to meet new safety standards. Pantex stores more than 12,000 plutonium pits.

"Building the MPF at Pantex would eliminate the need to transport the plutonium pits, increasing safety, and reducing environmental concerns," Cornyn, R-Texas, said in a news release. "Pantex is the most

cost-effective site in the nuclear weapons program, and every operation is designed to protect human health and safety, the environment, and against the threat of theft or accidental exposure."

But some people who live nearby don't want Pantex to get the facility, which would create about 1,000 jobs.

"We do not need to build those (pits) in an area that is primarily agricultural, breadbasket to the world, and over a major aquifer,"

said Jeri Osborne, who lives near the plant and calls Cornyn's safety claims "hogwash."

The environmental group Greenpeace also has opposed plans to build the pit facility.

But Cornyn, who serves on the Senate Armed Services Committee's Strategic Forces subcommittee and

the Environment and the Public Works Committee's subcommittee responsible for nuclear safety, says safety is the key attraction for Pantex.

He met Tuesday with acting administrator of the National Nuclear Security Administration, Linton S. Brooks, and wrote a letter outlining benefits of locating the MPF in the Panhandle.

The facility would begin initial operations in 2018, with full production slated for 2020.

It would have a production capacity of at least 125 pits annually and the ability to expand as needed.

The United States' pit production operations were shut down in 1989 at the energy department's Rocky Flats facility near Denver in response to alleged violations of environmental statutes.

"We do not need to build those (pits) into an area that is... bread basket to the world."

— Jeri Osborne
area resident

NEWS IN BRIEF

Hutchison fights for Gulf War vet

WASHINGTON (AP) — Although she supports the death penalty, Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison said a Gulf War veteran facing federal execution should be allowed to get a brain scan before President Bush decides whether the soldier should be put to death.

Decorated Army veteran Louis Jones Jr. is scheduled to die by lethal injection March 18 at the federal prison in Terre Haute, Ind. He has exhausted appeals but has asked Bush to spare his life.

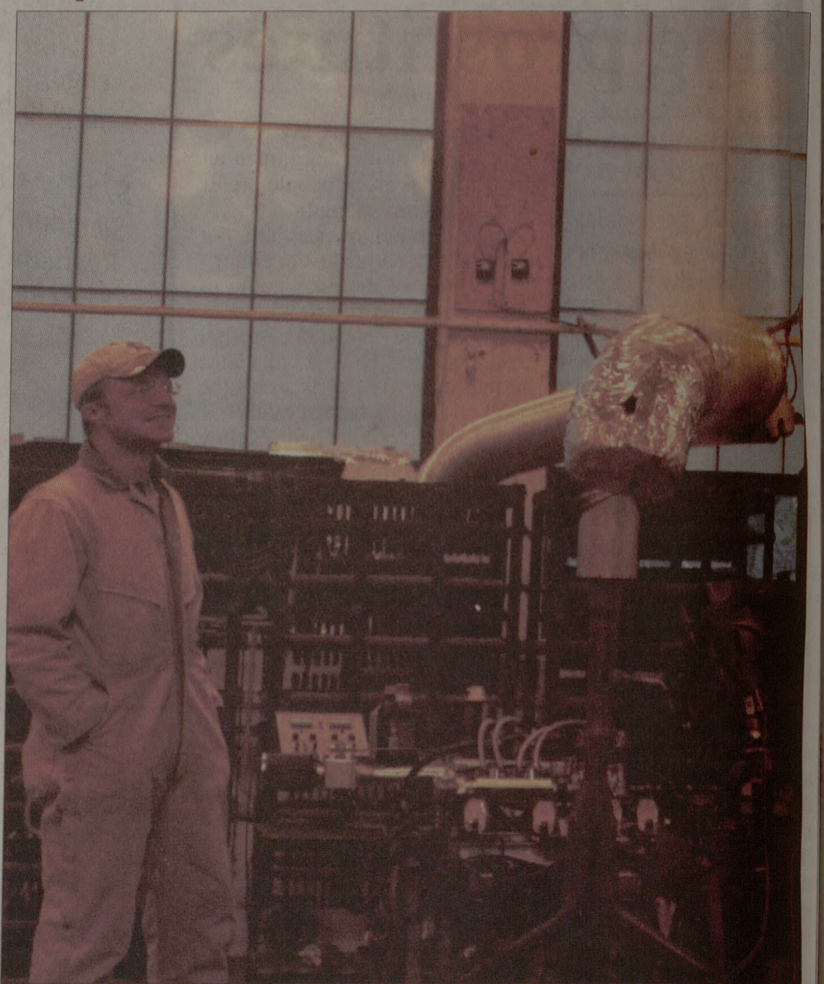
Jones, 52, has admitted to raping and killing Pvt. Trecie McBride after kidnapping her from Goodfellow

Air Force Base in San Angelo in 1995. But in his clemency petition to Bush, he blames brain damage caused by exposure to nerve gas during the Gulf War.

"He should not be executed until he has the MRI to determine if there is brain damage," said Hutchison, a Texas Republican. MRI is an abbreviation for magnetic resonance imaging, a high-powered brain scan.

Hutchison has been a champion of research on Gulf War veterans conducted by Dr. Robert Haley, an epidemiologist with the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. She has secured \$11 million in federal money to support his studies, including \$1 million in the 2003 spending bill that Congress passed this month.

Pipe dreams

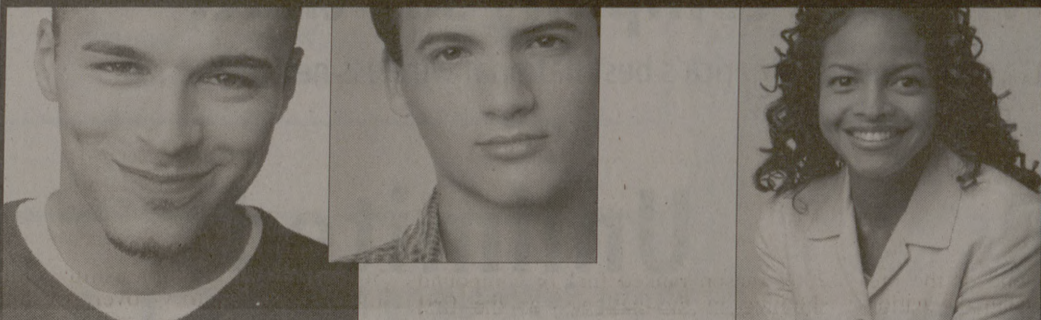


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