

State, DOE continue talks on future of natural areas

June 26/00

by R. Cathey Daniels
for The Oak Ridger

The state has been granted more time to work out agreements to preserve seven natural areas on the Oak Ridge Reservation.

In addition, the state is considering proposing an expansion of boundaries of those existing natural areas.

The Department of Energy's Oak Ridge Operations realty officer in a letter dated May 17 served 30-day notice to the Tennessee Natural Areas Program of termination of registry agreements that protect the unique reservation lands from alteration or development.

The notice of termination would have ended today the 15-year-old agreements of protection.

However, the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation learned Friday through Oak Ridge Operation's realty officer, Katy Kates, that a so-called "tenancy hold-over" had been granted the state.

The Natural Areas Program, encompassed in the division of Natural Heritage, is administered through TDEC.

"It is a very cooperative process we've been involved in for a long time," said Reggie Reeves, director

See NATURAL, Page 8A

FROM THE FRONT PAGE

NATURAL:

Continued from Page 1A

of the division of Natural Heritage, of the longstanding agreement between DOE and the state to protect the Oak Ridge Reservation lands.

"It's a little unfortunate that this termination letter showed up without any forewarning, but I think it will come out OK and both parties will be happy."

TDEC sent a letter to Oak Ridge Operations dated May 31 requesting a six-month extension of ORO's 30-day time limit.

Instead of the extension, ORO on June 9 sent to TDEC its version of the new licensing agreement.

"Right now we're just going to stop, take a deep breath, and see if we're using the right tool to protect these areas on the reservation," said Reeves after learning Friday of the extra time allowed the state.

"As I understand it (the tenancy hold-over), DOE is going to keep our agreement in place until there's a new one in place."

ORO could not be reached for comment before this morning's deadline.

Reeves indicated that likely some changes to ORO's proposal would need to be made before the state could sign off on the agreement.

"There's a whole suite of issues about access to DOE land, such as notification, right of entry and liability issues, that we need to look at," said Reeves.

"I'm not sure the instrument they sent us is the best one. But I think in the next few weeks we'll get this all ironed out."

Also TDEC has been working with Oak Ridge National Laboratory to determine whether the boundaries of the natural areas need to be "redefined or expanded."

"We are working on redefining those boundaries to more accurately reflect the acreage needed to protect the ecologically sensitive areas on the reservation," said Reeves.

"We've been working on that at least a couple of years — it just so happens as we were nearing the conclusion of that work, we got this letter of termination, which kind of complicated the issue a little bit."

Reeves said the state is "very close" to bringing the boundary proposal to the bargaining table with DOE, and the hope is that the new licensing agreement will cover that proposal.

"Now our hope is to get this all done with one DOE instrument," said Reeves.