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News from the Savannah River National Laboratory

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Wilhite Receives Prestigious Don Orth Award

AIKEN, S.C. – The Savannah River Site recently honored Elmer Wilhite, a chemist with the Savannah River Technology Center, with the Donald A. Orth Award of Merit for his longstanding research and leadership and pioneering work in low-level waste disposal.

The Orth Award, which celebrates exceptional achievements in technical excellence and professional leadership, was presented to Wilhite for 30 years' worth of contributions in the area of environmental and low-level waste management. His contributions span fundamental environmental science, low-level waste process improvements and the development of the Saltstone facility and E-Area vaults at SRS.

"Elmer Wilhite is an internationally recognized expert in nuclear waste disposal technology," says SRTC Director Dr. Todd Wright, "He has helped to direct SRS's low-level waste disposal to ensure that the environment and the public are protected. He helped pioneer the development of the Saltstone facility, E-Area vaults and made possible SRS becoming the DOE Complex leader in low-level waste disposal and treatment technology."

In nominating him for the Orth Award, Wilhite's peers recognized Wilhite's pioneering spirit and tireless enthusiasm through his innovative accomplishments and generous mentoring, leading to the advancement of environmental and low-level waste management. Wilhite's leadership "contributed significantly to the successful development of performance assessments for two low-level waste disposal facilities at SRS, the Saltstone Facility and E-Area. These are technically challenging models requiring expertise in hydrogeology, geochemistry, materials, groundwater modeling and engineering.

Wilhite has led DOE complex-wide and international efforts in low-level waste treatment and disposal. As an example, he chaired an International Atomic Energy Agency meeting to develop a comparison of health and environmental impacts of various energy production fuel cycles.

Wilhite's communication skills are sought out when technical topics are presented to diverse stakeholders such as the Citizen's Advisory Board, the National Academy of Science and the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control.

A key factor for receiving the Orth Award is serving as an exceptional role model for younger scientists and engineers. Wilhite's nominators noted that, "The same character traits that earn Elmer the respect of his peers also make him an excellent mentor to the younger members of the staff. He has a knack for clearly communicating his vision of a project to others with whom he is working that brings out the best in all involved."

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