

DOE sees Oak Ridge as a national asset

By Duncan Mansfield
The Associated Press

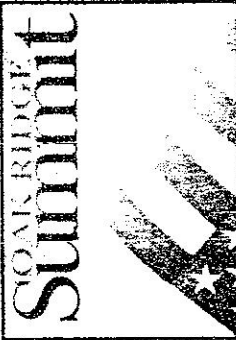
OAK RIDGE — Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary joined a chorus Friday in tout-

ing the economic and scientific value of the Oak Ridge research facilities even in lean budgetary times.

"I am here with any number of other people focusing the public

not merely in Tennessee but nationally on the fact that this important facility not only benefits Tennessee but benefits the nation," Ms. O'Leary said during a two-day summit organized by U.S. Rep. Zach Wamp of Chattanooga.

The new Republican majority in Congress is eyeing DOE for budget cutting in its drive to reduce the deficit. Ms. O'Leary said she admires the discipline to hold ranks, but wonders whether "that discipline is misplaced and shortsight-



ed. It looks to what I have often called political trophies as opposed to looking at the impact of

what is planned."

Proposals to dramatically slash the DOE budget are "insane," she said, noting her department has a major role to play in national security issues and environmental policy.

Calls for eliminating the Oak Ridge National Laboratory are the work of "well intentioned Congress people not well educated about the benefits coming from these national labs," Ms. O'Leary said.

The labs generate new technologies that produce jobs today and tomorrow, she said.

"It seems to me very shortsighted to now be focused on stripping these resources out of Oak Ridge at a time when the Congress itself and specifically the Republicans say that what they are about is providing for a stronger economic future for citizens."

Not all Republicans slight the

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Value of Oak Ridge.

Sen. Bill Frist, R-Tenn., told the conference that he believes Oak Ridge can make a strong case for continued support "if our goal really is to create an American dream for that next generation."

"Our goal for Oak Ridge scientists should be to increase their challenges and not to reduce them," Frist said.

Chairman for Oak Ridge to

main vibrant, to remain viable, Oak Ridge is going to have to change with changing times, shifting missions just a bit (and) taking advantage of the tremendous resources that are here."

Frist, a heart surgeon and published researcher, said Oak Ridge has brought together "the most brilliant minds in the world" and he fears that "once it begins to slip away, you can't bring it back together."

Gov. Don Sundquist met with Ms. O'Leary and urged her to keep Oak Ridge in mind for new initiatives as the agency consolidates its

operations.

"No state in the union — and no governor — will be working harder on securing those new contracts and projects than we will," he told the conference.

"This goes beyond our common desire to protect the jobs of those who work at Energy Department installations in Oak Ridge. This is about Tennessee economic future," Sundquist said.

Wamp concluded the conference by challenging leaders in the Oak Ridge-Knoxville-Chattanooga corridor of East Tennessee to develop a regional economic strategy.