

Environmental groups map next phase of West Valley nuclear site cleanup

By Rick Miller, County Reporter
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Members of a panel speak at an environmental program on the cleanup at the West Valley Demonstration Project.

BUFFALO — A coalition of environmental groups met Thursday night in a Buffalo snowstorm to drum up public interest in important scoping sessions later this month on the next phase of nuclear cleanup at the West Valley Demonstration Project.

Dr. Alan Lockwood, a former University at Buffalo neurological professor, was guest speaker at the program set up by the Western New York Environmental Alliance at the Burchfield-Penney Art Gallery.

His major takeaways from the environmental push for a full cleanup at West Valley was that radioactivity is bad and that it has already gotten into the environment from West Valley —

including traces in Lake Ontario sediment via Lake Erie and the Niagara River. Some of that was the result of controlled releases from the site between 1969 and 1971.

There are also groundwater plumes of radioactive contamination from past spills. Plus, state- and federally-licensed low-level disposal areas sit on a plateau near local creeks that drain into Cattaraugus Creek and Lake Erie, Lockwood said.

The nation's first and only commercial spent nuclear fuel reprocessing plant operated from 1966 to 1972. Under a contract Nuclear Fuel Services had with New York state, it walked away from the plant in 1974.

The West Valley Demonstration Project Act of 1980 directed the Department of Energy to clean up the site starting with 600,000 gallons of high-level radioactive liquid stored in a giant underground tank. The liquid has been turned into radioactive glass sealed in stainless steel cylinders and concrete casks.

“Radioactivity is bad for you,” Lockwood said. “There’s a fair amount of it at West Valley that needs to be taken care of.”

Lockwood also expressed concern over climate change and who will oversee the site generations from now. Without institutional controls, radioactive waste left at the site could find its way into Lake Erie with the next intense local rainstorm.

“The implication for West Valley increases the probability of further erosion at the site,” Lockwood said.

Diane D’Arrigo, radioactive waste director of the Nuclear Information and Research Service and a member of the West Valley Action Network, said it is important to attend the upcoming scoping sessions to make comments. She encouraged others to submit written comments. The U.S. Department of Energy will conduct scoping meetings on the West Valley Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) March 19 in West Valley, March 29 in Buffalo and March 21 in Irving.

The Department of Energy has a website for the Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement: seiswestvalleysite@emcbc.doe.gov and at www.seiswestvalleysite.com.

Anges Williams of the Indigenous Peoples Initiative said many people don’t understand the technical issues. She said that radioactive releases into Cattaraugus Creek have affected Senecas who rely on the creek. No more radioactive waste should be brought to the site, she said. Williams suggested Western New York help raise \$10 billion for a total cleanup of the site if the federal government is going to limit the extent of the cleanup by not allocating enough money for the job.

Another speaker, Barbara Warren of the Citizens Environmental Coalition, said the site never should have been chosen.

She accused the Department of Energy of “bungling and mismanagement” at the site. It has not met project objectives. The main process building was to have been demolished years ago in order to get to the source of a strontium 90- plume that starts under a corner of the building.

“It’s likely that won’t be completed until 2019,” she said.

Lynda Schneekloth, chairman of the Western New York Advocacy Alliance, said, “There really is no safe level of radiation. We are trying to motivate people to learn about it and take action.” The first scoping session, March 19, is at the West Valley Firemen’s Memorial Hall on Route 240, from 6 to 9:30 p.m.

That will be followed March 20 in Buffalo at the Erie Community College Campus, 121 Ellicott St., in the Minnie Gillette Auditorium, from 6 to 9: 30 p.m.

The final scoping session on March 21 will be at the Seneca Nation of Indians Tribal Council Chambers in Irving on the Cattaraugus Territory from 6 to 9:30 p.m.