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Meeting held to prepare for upcoming West Valley cleanup scoping sessions

- By Rich Place, Managing Editor, Mar 11, 2018 Updated 9 hrs ago



Seneca Nation President Todd Gates speaks Sunday at an informational meeting to learn more about the upcoming West Valley cleanup scoping sessions.

Press photo by Rich Place



Joanne Hameister, president of the Coalition on West Valley Nuclear Wastes, speaks Sunday at an informational meeting to learn more about the upcoming West Valley cleanup scoping sessions.

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SPRINGVILLE — A group of experts on Sunday helped educate the public about the upcoming state “scoping sessions” that will address future cleanup at the West Valley Demonstration project site.

More than two dozen people attended the meeting held at Springville Center for the Arts, which included Seneca Nation President Todd Gates and members of The Coalition on West Valley Nuclear Wastes, the Sierra Club and Wyoming, Erie and Cattaraugus Communities Act on the Pipeline (WECAP).

The upcoming scoping sessions, scheduled for next Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday in West Valley, Buffalo and Irving, respectively, will allow interested persons and agencies to comment on what they think the future cleanup at the West Valley site in northern Cattaraugus County should include.

“This will be the final decision for West Valley,” said Joanne Hameister, president of the Coalition on West Valley Nuclear Wastes. “So we have to make very sure it’s the right one.”

Ray Vaughn, a professional geologist and environmental scientist who has been working with issues at the West Valley site since 1978, explained the scoping process is an early step in the environmental review process to guide cleanup for the decision of what to do with buried waste buried at the site.

“The plant only operated for six years and we’re well into decades of trying to deal with what was left over,” said Hameister, referring to when Nuclear Fuel Services operated the plant in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s.

Vaughn and Charley Bowman, of the Sierra Club Niagara Group, went into detail about the buried waste and its proximity to Buttermilk Creek, which flows into nearby Cattaraugus Creek.

“The concern is that over the next hundreds and thousands of years, the rainfall — especially accentuated by climate change — is going to enlarge these existing revines and at some point cut into the existing burial trenches and start to expose and carry away radioactive waste and carry it downstream,” said Vaughn.

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He added previous environmental impact studies have had conflicting reports as to how soon this could happen.

“One suggested it was a very severe problem that would occur in the next few hundred years,” he said. “The other basically said ‘no big deal, it’s not going to happen anytime soon.’”

However, no matter the timeline, Vaughn called the erosion near the site “not a trivial issue.”

The Seneca Nation of Indians finds itself upstream of two separate issues with potential environmental impact: its Cattaraugus Territory in Irving is upstream of the West Valley site and the Allegany Territory near Salamanca is upstream of a potential Coudersport, Pa. plant to treat fracking wastes and discharge it into the Allegheny River.

Those issues brought Seneca Nation President Gates to the gathering on Sunday and he explained the impact each has on the territories and nearby communities.

“I’m for a total cleanup,” he said in relation to the West Valley site, “but we have to consider how we are going to handle that once we dig it all out of the ground, where we are going to put it (and) how we are going transport it. The funding just needs to be increased.”

Emphasis by multiple speakers was also on educating upcoming generations about the issue at West Valley site due to the timeline of the cleanup.

Those who gathered for the 90-minute series of speakers also learned more about how they can become involved in the scoping process, especially how to comment at one of the meetings or by mail or online.

“Last time they had these hearings they received 1,900 comments,” said Lia Oprea, founder of WECAP that organized the event. “Now we would like to beat that.”

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Those interested in speaking at the upcoming scoping sessions must register, and there is a five-minute limit for comments. To register, contact DOE document manager Martin Krentz at 942-4007 or email martin.krentz@emcbc.doe.gov.

The first DOE scoping session will be held March 19 from 6 to 9:30 p.m. at the West Valley Volunteer Hose Company, 9091 Route 240, West Valley.

The next two sessions are:

- March 20, from 6 to 9:30 p.m. at Erie Community College, City Campus, Post Office Building, 121 Ellicott St., Buffalo, in the Minnie Gillette Auditorium.
- March 21, from 6 to 9:30 p.m. in the Seneca Nation of Indians Cattaraugus Council Chambers, 12837 Route 438, Irving.

Officials on Sunday also encouraged people to make written comments on the scope for the SEIS before the April 23 deadline.

A program similar to the one in Springville on Sunday will be held again on Thursday from 6 to 7:30 p.m. at Crane Library, 633 Elmwood Ave., Buffalo.

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