

No changes in West Valley demo plan

Activists wanted more safeguards incorporated into plan to dismantle radioactive building, but federal officials maintain sufficient safety measures are in place.

By [Phil Gambini](#)

Activist concerns notwithstanding, federal officials are sticking with their plan to demolish a highly radioactive building at the [West Valley Demonstration Project](#).

Despite the [calls from residents, activists and experts](#), “no major amendments” have been made to the plan, according to a spokesman for the [U.S. Department of Energy](#), Joseph Pillitere.

Officials maintain sufficient safety procedures are in place.

Extensive work has been completed to remove seven miles of piping and 50 tons of equipment from inside the five-story, 350,000-square-foot building, Pillitere said. The work reduced the building’s radioactivity by 98 percent.

“This allows us to safely and compliantly deconstruct the building at a deliberate and methodical pace and sequence over an approximately three-year period, while protecting employees, the public and the environment,” he said in an emailed statement.

The remaining 2 percent of radiation left in the building is small compared to what was once there, but the danger remains enormous, according to [Charley Bowman, Ph.D.](#), a retired science professor at the University at Buffalo and former executive director of the [Western New York Peace Center](#).

“That’s still a lot of curies ... a huge amount of radioactivity,” he said.

However, federal officials say they intend to further reduce the remaining radiation.

The [facility began operating](#) in 1966 as an attempt to recycle used nuclear fuel, including plutonium. Materials were trucked in by the ton, then chopped up and dissolved in acid. The solvent was sifted for any leftover, viable fuel, which could be repackaged and sold.

The project lasted only six years, but generated substantial radioactive contamination before the company contracted to operate the plant pulled out in 1977. Since 1980, the [cleanup has cost](#) federal and state taxpayers upwards of \$3 billion.

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Demolition work — which has faced several prior delays, in part due to the pandemic — is slated to begin by the end of the year, according to Pillitere.

Bowman and others [are calling](#) for the building to be enclosed during the work to minimize the potential for contamination to escape.

“We are very concerned that DOE refuses to cover the plutonium building at [West Valley](#) while it is being demolished or deconstructed,” said [Diane D’Arrigo](#), an activist in the West Valley Action Network.

Anything that escapes from the site will “forever” taint the local environment with elements like plutonium, which is hazardous even in microscopic concentrations, Bowman said.

“The danger is just immense,” he said. “They should do everything they can to minimize the likelihood of that happening.”

Critics of the existing plan who [spoke to Investigative Post earlier this year](#) cited contamination issues at other facilities as reason for concern. Among them was [a job in Hanford, Washington](#), where 42 workers were exposed to radioactive contamination, some of which was detected as far as 10 miles away.

Dr. Ed Lyman, director of nuclear power safety for the Union of Concerned Scientists, previously told Investigative Post: “I’m not aware of any other Department of Energy incident where that many people are exposed or known to be exposed.”

[John Rendall](#), president and general manager of the contracting company handling the work, CH2M HILL BWXT WEST VALLEY LLC, did not address Hanford at a recent, local meeting, but said the few companies that do such work learn from each other’s mistakes.

“We take lessons learned as we go, so each time we do it, we get a little bit better,” he said.