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West Valley group to ask for more cleanup funding

By Rick Miller, Olean Times Herald | Posted: Thursday, April 24, 2014 4:08 pm

ASHFORD HOLLOW — The West Valley Citizens Task Force will meet May 14 with House and Senate staff and with U.S. Department of Energy officials to press for increased funding at the West Valley Demonstration Project.

As they did last year, a half-dozen task force members will probably drive down to Washington, D.C., in a van provided by Cattaraugus County and meet the next day with members of the House Appropriations Committee staff and Senate staffers to show why 2015 federal year funding should be increased from the \$60 million recommended in President Barack Obama's budget to \$75 million. The \$75 million annual funding is the level recommended in the 2010 Environmental Impact Statement on the Phase 1 cleanup at the West Valley Demonstration Project.

The joint cleanup by the U.S. Department of Energy and the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority began with the West Valley Demonstration Project Act of 1980, which authorized the cleanup of the former Nuclear Fuel Services, which recovered plutonium from spent nuclear fuel at the site from 1966 to 1972.

It closed in 1974, leaving issues ranging from highly radioactive liquid waste to a plume of strontium 90 moving with groundwater toward creeks that are tributaries of Cattaraugus Creek that empty into Lake Erie.

Joe Patti of West Valley, one member of the Citizens Task Force that met Wednesday, said those speaking with House and Senate staff members who will be making funding recommendations should emphasize the site's location.

“Three quarters of the world's fresh water is downstream from us,” he said.

Mr. Patti said congressional staff should be aware of what an additional \$15 million a year can do to save money over the life of the project by accomplishing the cleanup sooner. The point should also be made with Department of Energy officials, he said.

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Ray Geimer, deputy director for the contractor on the cleanup, CH2M Hill, agreed.

“If it (\$75 million) were to materialize, we could put it to good use,” he said.

John Rendall, regulatory strategy manager for CH2M Hill, said the priorities of the project are removing high-level waste canisters from the Main Process Building to a concrete storage pad and demolishing the building so the source of Strontium 90 leakage beneath the building can be accessed and removed.

Officials said it costs \$5 million a year just to maintain the Main Process Building, where radioactive hot spots are being decontaminated and asbestos is being removed.

“The quicker we can remove the canisters from the building, the better,” said one task force member.

“The building is falling apart.”

Mr. Rendall said moving the first casks containing highly radioactive glass — formed from liquid wastes from the process used to recover plutonium — will not occur until spring 2015. Eight concrete casks that will contain an overpack holding five of the 10-foot-tall stainless steel canisters have been fabricated. Eight more overpack canisters are pending.

The concrete canisters, each containing five of the stainless steel glass-filled containers, will sit on a specially made concrete storage pad hundreds of yards away until they can be moved to a federal nuclear repository. The concrete canisters have a 50-year life.

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Questions Remain on Next West Valley Cleanup Phase

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By Rick Miller, Olean Times Herald

ASHFORD HOLLOW — Members of the West Valley Action Network met Wednesday with state and federal energy officials to express their concerns over the next phases of the West Valley Demonstration Project nuclear cleanup.

Diane D'Arrigo of the Nuclear Information and Resource Service said the U.S. Department of Energy and New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA) agreed to meet with representatives of six groups watchdogging the nuclear cleanup project in Ashford prior to Wednesday's West Valley Quarterly Public Meeting.

The West Valley Demonstration Project began in 1980 to clean up the former Nuclear Fuel Services Co. site in West Valley, where spent nuclear fuel rods were reprocessed to recover plutonium from 1966 to 1974 when it closed due to stricter environmental rules. High-level radioactive liquid waste was converted into glass and placed in 10-foot tall steel containers.

Ms. D'Arrigo said the groups, including the West Valley Coalition on Nuclear Wastes and Cattaraugus County Concerned Citizens, have questions regarding the Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement and the transparency of studies by a private contractor that will help determine the scope of the final cleanup.

In 2010, the West Valley cleanup was split into two phases: the short-term goal, including demolition of most of the site's buildings; and the removal of 275 high-level radioactive waste canisters from a special storage cell at the Main Process Building so it too can be demolished. Those canisters will be stored in a five-canister overpack that will be placed in a concrete vertical storage container.

Beginning in 2016, the storage containers will be hauled along a 1,400-foot road to a concrete pad, where they will stay until a national repository is available. Each concrete cask will weigh between 80 and 85 tons.

Beneath the foundation of the Main Process Building is the source of a persistent strontium 90 leak that has spread in groundwater. Once the building is demolished, the source can be removed.

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In the meantime, an 800-foot permeable treatment wall made of zeolite, designed to remove picocuries of radioactivity from strontium 90 as it passes through the wall, appears to be doing its job, according to Robert Steiner of the Regulatory Strategy and Compliance Office of CH2M Hill, the West Valley cleanup contractor.

Groundwater that registers up to 10,000 picocuries of radioactivity before it hits the permeable wall shows less than 1,000 picocuries after it passes through the material, which resembles cat litter, Mr. Steiner said.

Two working groups, the Exhumation Group, and the Erosion Group, are studying what should be done in Phase II.

The Erosion Group is trying to settle on a model to use to study the impact of decades and centuries of erosion would have on the site, while the Exhumation Group is looking at the cost-benefit analysis of removing not only the underground tanks with radioactive residue, but also the state and national low-level radioactive burial sites adjacent to the West Valley Demonstration Project.

The cost of a total removal has been estimated at more than \$6 billion, while the cost to close the site with everything in place and protected with engineered barriers and perpetual monitoring begins at \$1 billion.

Those attending the Quarterly Public Meeting heard from staff from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which has said its License Termination Rule must be followed in the site's decommissioning.

One NRC staffer, Chad Glenn, senior project manager in the Waste Management and Environmental Office, said the site could have both a restricted release and unrestricted release for different parts of the 3,000-acre site. The plant used less than 200 acres of the site.

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