

West Valley cleanup comment period extended by 30 days

Site unsuitable for nuclear waste storage, draft comments from task force state

- By RICK MILLER, Olean Times Herald, 04-26-2018, 58 min ago

ASHFORD HOLLOW — The West Valley Citizens Task Force met Wednesday to discuss draft comments on the next phase of cleanup at the West Valley Demonstration Project.

Task force members reviewed 17 pages of draft comments on the Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) for Phase 2 Decommissioning at West Valley.

The SEIS will consider alternatives including:

- Sitewide removal.
- Sitewide close-in-place.
- Hybrid alternatives which would not include complete removal of underground tanks that contain radioactivity and the state and federal low-level waste radioactive disposal sites.

The remarks had been previously reviewed by Task Force members in conference calls and emails over the past two weeks and had been intended to be submitted on Monday, the original deadline.

However, after receiving thousands of comments prior to Monday's deadline, the U.S. Department of Energy announced it had extended the deadline to May 25. The project website is www.SEISWestValleySite.com. Comments may be emailed to SEISWestValleySite@emcbc.doe.gov.

Twenty years ago, the Citizens Task Force was unanimous in its conclusion that "the site was in no way suitable for the long term, permanent storage or disposal of long-lived radionuclides." And draft comments from the current task force seem to agree with those findings.

The conclusion in draft task force comments states: "Unlike arid regions of the West which are geologically stable and better suited for storage and disposal of nuclear waste, the West Valley site receives excessive precipitation annually causing routine flooding and rapid erosion events, and is less stable from geologic and seismic forces."

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In addition, the task force noted population centers downstream of the site rely on nearby water resources for drinking water and other recreational activities enjoyed by local residents and tourists.

"The ensuing 20 years of additional study and monitoring, documentation of recurring severe storms and erosion events, plus a better understanding of the future effects of climate change on Western New York weather, only serve to reinforce that the West Valley Demonstration Project site is simply unsuitable for the permanent storage or disposal of any radioactive wastes," the draft comments concluded. "Based on this primary tenet, current Citizen Task Force members are likewise unanimous in their belief that the only Phase 2 decision which can ensure public health and safety for decades and centuries into the future is the eventual sitewide removal of all wastes."

West Valley was the site of the nation's only commercial spent nuclear fuel reprocessing plant and operated from 1966 to 1972 when it closed for upgrades. The plant never reopened and Nuclear Fuel Services walked away from the plant in 1974, leaving the future cleanup to taxpayers.

The cleanup has cost nearly \$3 billion so far, and could reach \$10 billion under the sitewide cleanup option.

Lee Gordon of the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, which shares oversight at West Valley with the U.S. Department of Energy, said the Phase 2 studies are complete and published on the website www.WestValleyPhaseOneStudies.org. That includes a 500-page long-term erosion modeling study.

One Task Force member, Ray Vaughn of Hamburg said even severe U.S. budget cuts were unlikely to lead to solidified high level radioactive waste stored outside in casks left unsupervised. "It is a very slight possibility" that should be addressed in the SEIS, he added.

Task Force member Eric Wohlers of the Cattaraugus County Health Department said he "can't imagine people are going to walk away (from the site) and let them stay here."

Bryan Bower, the Department of Energy site director, said under the West Valley Demonstration Act of 1980, the act "is not completed until the high-level waste is transported."

With the government shutdown of the Yucca Mountain project, there is no national repository for high level radioactive waste being constructed.

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Task force members considered asking for some kind of insurance that that casks would not remain at West Valley past their 50-year design life.

“Long-term interim storage (at West Valley) is a concern,” said Vaughn.

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