

SPRINGVILLE JOURNAL

It's time for the Department of Energy to clean up West Valley.

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Submitted

The following is a guest column from the Town of Ashford Board:

Once again, the Town of Ashford and the West Valley Demonstration Project are on the outside looking in as far as the United States Department of Energy is concerned. A recent DOE proposal for interpreting high-level waste might have cleared the way for relocation of West Valley's high-level waste, but DOE has now updated that proposal to exclude West Valley. Also, DOE could be disposing of the transuranic waste that has been stored at the site since the 1980s, but DOE refuses to dispose of this waste at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, the one disposal site in the nation where it belongs. The Town of Ashford and its residents deserve better.

While DOE continues to treat West Valley and the Town of Ashford differently from its other cleanup sites for cost reasons or because of state-federal disputes, transuranic waste containers on the site, some from the 1980s, are starting to become unstable, and one recently broke apart and leaked. These containers were never meant for long-term storage in this location. One significant weather event could easily compromise other containers which are currently stored in nothing more than a metal building.

The Town of Ashford always rises to the occasion to be an active and supporting partner of DOE. We have patiently waited for decisions to be made, and we regularly work well with local DOE staff. DOE is currently working on a complicated proposal for disposal of West Valley transuranic waste that requires actions by Congress, the US NRC and the State of Texas. But DOE could open a disposal pathway for West Valley's transuranic waste today at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant by simply recognizing the defense work that was done at West Valley.

DOE says West Valley waste is "commercial" waste, which means the West Valley transuranic waste can't go to WIPP, since WIPP only takes defense waste. But 60 percent of West Valley waste came from the nuclear weapons complex, and most of the plutonium and all the uranium recovered at West Valley went back to the defense complex. This means the West Valley wastes should be defined as defense waste. In

fact, West Valley is on DOE's list of "atomic weapons employers," making many West Valley employees eligible for the Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program that compensates individuals for a broad range of illnesses received through working at DOE weapons complex facilities. DOE can't have it both ways.

Last year, DOE proposed to change the way it defines high level reprocessing waste, basing it on radiological characteristics, rather than origin. DOE said this change could open up disposal pathways for sites around the nation, expediting the cleanup of nuclear waste sites like West Valley. The Town of Ashford's comments were supportive of DOE's re-interpretation, not only at West Valley, but across the DOE complex, because DOE said it could move the clean-up forward and get waste out of West Valley and other sites.

Now DOE says the West Valley HLW won't be part of this initiative because DOE considers West Valley waste to be commercial waste. The whole point of DOE's proposal to interpret the definition of HLW was to manage the nation's HLW based on its characteristics rather than its origin. But in treating the West Valley HLW differently than the waste at Hanford, Savannah River and Idaho, because they call it "commercial," DOE is doing exactly what they said shouldn't be done.

West Valley deserves the same cleanup priority as every other site where neighbors live next to nuclear waste. It's time for DOE to abandon its outdated position on West Valley waste being commercial waste, treat the HLW like the nation's other HLW and get the aging transuranic waste into the queue for disposal at WIPP.

We are extremely concerned with the concept of "open-air" demolition of the main plant process building given the off-site contamination issues that have occurred at Hanford, Wash.

DOE continues to ask the community to do something it is not environmentally or economically suited for. The longer this continues, the higher the cost to the local community and the federal government. Continued delay and disagreement will continue to increase costs while the Town of Ashford deals with the on-going stigma of a nuclear waste dump.