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Undersecretary of Energy visits West Valley Demonstration Project

By Rick Miller | County Reporter



Paul M. Dabber (center), U.S. Energy Department undersecretary for science, toured the West Valley Demonstration Project Monday with Bryan Bower (right), DOE site director, and deputy Craig Rieman (left).

Press photo by Rick Miller

WEST VALLEY — Energy Undersecretary for Science Paul M. Dabbar made his first visit Monday to the West Valley Demonstration Project and came away impressed with progress in the cleanup and the employees.

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Following a tour with Bryan Bower, West Valley site director for the Department of Energy, Deputy Director Craig Rieman and others, Dabbar said the West Valley cleanup "is one of the most important DOE projects."

Dabbar worked at several New York nuclear power plants before becoming an investment banker with J.P. Morgan, where he was managing director of mergers and acquisitions when tapped for the DOE post. He learned nuclear engineering in the U.S. Navy, serving aboard a nuclear submarine.

"There has been a lot of near term progress" in the West Valley cleanup, Dabbar said. Most notably he pointed to the spot adjacent to the Main Process Building where the vitrification building used to stand.

Dabbar said the West Valley vitrification plant, which mixed high-level radioactive liquid waste with chemicals to make glass, "spearheaded" the technology now being utilized at other DOE sites including Savannah River, S.C., and soon at Hanford, Wash.

West Valley engineers designed, built, operated and then tore down the vitrification plant, Dabbar said. "It's a real success. Whenever we have a cleanup we learn a lot."

Asked whether a decision had been made on an open-air demolition of the Main Process Building, Dabbar replied that some things had not been finalized between DOE and officials from the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA). It has been delayed indefinitely.

Dabbar said the demolition of the vitrification building was another learning experience regarding the characterization and packaging of the debris. "It is applicable to the main building," he added.

The demolition of the main plant building was seen as the end of phase 1 of the cleanup, although that milestone will be delayed somewhat.

Dabbar said areas of the main plant have different levels of radioactivity that will require different measures. It is more than 95% deactivated, according to the contractor CHBWV.

Dabbar said that while a demolition plan for the Main Process Building "is not fully identified." There is different contamination on different areas. Officials are "attacking it room by room, planning it room by room."

Some rooms continue to show high levels of radioactivity, some so much that it has entered the concrete walls.

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Removal of the building is necessary to get to the source of radioactive contamination left over from the days when the nation's first commercial spent nuclear fuel reprocessing plant operated by Nuclear Fuel Services.

It operated from the mid-1960s until 1972 when it shut down for renovations. The spent nuclear fuel rod reprocessing plant never reopened and in 1976, the company walked away from the site.

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter signed the West Valley Demonstration Project Act. The cleanup bill shared by the federal and state governments exceeds \$2 billion and will go much higher.

The Department of Energy and NYSERDA are currently involved in Phase 2 studies of the West Valley cleanup. Besides the Main Process Building, which will now be part of Phase 2, big questions remain on whether underground tanks that once contained highly-radioactive liquids and the adjacent state-licensed and NRC low-level radioactive waste landfills will be removed.

Dabbar said the tanks have been dried, but remain contaminated. "They are very stable," he said. No decision has been made on whether to remove them or fill them with grout.

There are 275 steel cylinders 10-feet tall that contain glass made with radioactive liquid. They were removed from the Main Process Building and placed in concrete overpack casks on a pad near the rubber-covered landfills.

"I can't say enough about the workforce and the leadership team," Dabbar said.

West Valley remains one of the top sites for safety and getting things done on time and on budget, Dabbar said.

"There is significantly less waste here," Dabbar said. Much of it has been sent off-site using additional funding requested by DOE and approved in the federal budget. The site receives about \$75 million a year for operations.

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