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DOE plans to begin open air demolition of Main Plant at West Valley next year

By RICK MILLER

An excavator is used to start demolition of the waste tank farm equipment shelter in November 2019 after completing the removal of two condenser structures at the West Valley Demonstration Project.

Photo provided

WEST VALLEY — Due to COVID-19 restrictions that have slowed work for months at the West Valley Demonstration Project, the U.S. Department of Energy plans to begin the open air demolition of the Main Plant Process Building in 2021 rather than this year.

Kelly Wooley, deputy general manager of CH2M Hill BXWT West Valley, the main contractor of the nuclear cleanup at the former spent nuclear fuel reprocessing plant in the town of Ashford, said Wednesday the main plant is about 85% deactivated.

Speaking to the West Valley Citizens Task Force, Wooley said details of the demolition of the Main Plant Process Building would be discussed in meetings in November. The reports will include detailed characterizations of the building from the thickness of concrete to the amount of metal rebar.

Excavators with special attachments will turn the building to rubble, much like other concrete reinforced buildings of the 44 structures that have been removed so far.

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The rubble will be sprayed with misting water to keep down dust from the building with the greatest amount of radioactivity of any building on the site. The surface of walls in high-radioactive areas were scrubbed, but radioactivity remains contained in some of the concrete.

Wooley said all staff are back on the site after shutting down for coronavirus protolcols. About 69 office employees continue to telework from home.

Wooley said a blue elasticized latex paint is sprayed on interior surfaces for contamination control.

Citizens Task Force member Ray Vaughan asked for a video of prior demolition. He also asked about wall and floor thickness in the Main Plant Process Building.

Pat Townsend, a member of the Coalition on West Valley Nuclear Wastes, a citizens watchdog group, asked if DOE and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation was releasing scoping comments for the Phase 2 Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement.

Lynn Winterberger of DEC said the comments had not been released, but could be requested under the state's Freedom of Information Law.

In another development, Andrea Mellon of the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA), said the level of leachate in trench 14 in the State Disposal Area had been increasing over the past few years, but that "all changes are small and do not impact public health and safety or the environment."

It would take 300 years at the present rate for the leachate to become a health and safety issue, Mellon said.

The State Disposal Area and adjacent Nuclear Regulatory Commission Federal Disposal Area are unlined trenches of low-level nuclear waste disposed at the site since the 1960s.

Trench 14 was the last trench to be filled. After groundwater infiltration was discovered in the 1990s, a slurry wall was added to divert water from the trenches and geomembrane was installed over the site to keep water from penetrating the surface of the ground and entering the trenches.

Vaughan maintained that the two large underground 600,000 gallon steel tanks still have contamination in them despite being emptied, rinsed and dried remotely.

There is sludge in the bottom of the tanks plus the steel supports inside the tanks, he said. There is also a "bathtub ring" around the interior of the tanks with a lot of radioactive contamination.

Vaughan said changing groundwater movement could impact the tanks, spreading the contamination to area waterways that empty into Cattaraugus Creek and Lake Erie.

Winterberger said the DEC looks at projects in terms of what will happen over the next 30 years, not 1,000 years in the future.