

Another Voice / Nuclear energy: Demolition at West Valley Nuclear Site Must be Monitored

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One of the most radioactive buildings in the United States is slated for open-air demolition 35 miles southeast, upwind and upstream of Buffalo and the Seneca Nation Cattaraugus Territory.

The U.S. Department of Energy plans to demolish the above-ground part of the Main Plant Process Building at the **West Valley nuclear site** this spring. The building, between 1966 and 1972, housed Nuclear Fuel Services' chemical extraction of plutonium and uranium from intensely radioactive nuclear power and weapons fuel, leaving behind immense amounts of radioactivity. Some ended up on and in the walls, floors and ceilings inside the building.

The question is: Can the demolition be done without spreading radioactivity throughout Western and Central New York, Canada, the Seneca Nation and communities downwind and downstream?

Demolition generates huge amounts of dust as rotating saws cut through steel beams and concrete walls. DOE has not provided necessary meaningful information to the public or the Nuclear Regulatory Commission documenting the safety or danger of open air demolition. Neither has DOE completed the inventory of radionuclides in the building required by the NRC.

Inhaling even a tiny speck of plutonium-239 can initiate lung cancer, possible if only 0.001% of the radioactivity is released into the air and water during demolition. The risk to humans and other animals will last for millions of years. [Succeeding generations of residents will be at risk as plutonium-239 is dangerous now and remains so for a half million years.]

Uranium-235, with a half-life of 700 million years, will stay dangerous for 14 billion years. Once dispersed in our region, it would get into the air, water, soil, crops and animals including us, our grandkids and their grandkids. Who is responsible for protecting the health of the region?

The West Valley Action Network believes the only way to protect surrounding communities from airborne radioactive "fallout" is to enclose the Main Plant Process Building prior to and during demolition. [There is precedent for enclosure: In 2016 DOE demolished two radioactive contaminated buildings at Knolls Lab near Schenectady under a "ventilated enclosure."]

To know if, and how much, radioactive dust is being released into our air and water during demolition requires off site and real-time air and water monitoring before, during and after demolition with ongoing real time public reporting. New York residents downwind and downstream deserve protection [by an enclosure and publicly reported monitoring. These protections will alert the public to any problems to avoid what happened at Hanford nuclear waste site in Washington State and the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico, where independent monitoring revealed plutonium releases].

THE BUFFALO NEWS

December 20, 2020

We call on our federal, state, tribal and local governments to protect our communities now and the lives of our children in the future.

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Another Voice is an issues-oriented column that appears on the editorial page each day. Writers must have some background or expertise on the topic about which they are writing. Submissions should be about 480 words. Email submissions to editpage@buffnews.com