

Start of West Valley main plant demolition set for July



A Demolition Support Complex at the West Valley Demonstration Project will support the workforce during the future demolition of the Main Plant Process Building, an EM priority for 2022. Dusty Mejak, an operator, inspects respirators inside the facility's new respirator issuance room.

Photo provided

By RICK MILLER

Olean Times Herald

Demolition of the Main Plant Process Building at the **West Valley Demonstration Project** is expected to begin in July.

John Rendall, president of CHBWV, the **WVDP** cleanup contractor, said during Wednesday's meeting of the West Valley Citizens Task Force the Main Plant Process Building is expected to be ready for demolition to begin in July.

Crews are testing the water management system designed to collect water sprayed to keep down dust during demolition. There are several air monitoring systems that will be in place during demolition — both onsite and offsite. One real-time monitoring system will be used to suspend demolition activities if needed for safety.

Much of the reason for the delay was due to COVID-19, which slowed work at the site for the past two years.

Olean Times Herald WEEKEND EDITION

Saturday, March 26, 2022

Crews have been working for most of the past two decades to remove as much of the radioactive material and equipment in the Main Plant Process Building where spent nuclear rods were ground up and dissolved in acid to recover plutonium from 1966 to 1972.

The more that is safely removed is that much less that can be released into the environment during demolition and removal.

In the product purification cell, where radioactivity had leached into the concrete, the walls are being etched with liquid nitrogen. So far, nearly 1,100 square feet of the 2,400-square-foot room have been addressed. It was described as similar to a large walk-in closet with very high ceilings.

Kelly Wooley, CHBWW deputy manager, said the liquid nitrogen at high pressure removes a thin layer of the concrete from the wall which is collected by a vacuum system below the jet nozzle. It appears about 80% of the radionuclides in the product purification cell are being removed by the process.

In a nearby vent wash room where more than a dozen ducts had been removed, a blue fixative was sprayed on walls to keep them from turning to dust during the demolition.

The demolition of the Main Plant Process Building is expected to take about two years.

Phases of project

Phase 1 of the cleanup at the **West Valley Demonstration Project** will end with the demolition of the plant down to ground level.

Phase 2 will take over at that point with excavation of the plant's foundation where a strontium 90 leak 50 years ago resulted in an underground plume that made its way to local waterways. A permeable treatment wall was installed nearly 15 years ago to intercept and treat the radioactive liquid percolating through the soil.

It's phase 2 that has some members of the Citizens Task Force concerned enough to form a separate working group that issued a report that urges independent experts be consulted over the next steps in the cleanup.

Ray Vaughan, one of two original Citizens Task Force members still on the CTF, formed the Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement Identification and Assessment Working Group.

The Phase 2 SEIS will be coming out in the next two or three years with the U.S. Department of Energy's preferred alternative on the cleanup — everything as the CTF has asked for, or leaving some things in the ground buried at the site and monitored.

There are two empty 600,000-gallon waste tanks buried in the ground that held liquid radioactive waste that has since been turned into 275 glass logs stored in protective containers at the site. The tanks have a radioactive residue remaining on the walls as well as interior metal frames supporting the tanks.

The concerns

Vaughan, like other CTF members, is concerned that if left in place, the tanks will corrode and be subject to erosion over decades and centuries. Two streams flow through the site, Franks Creek and Erdman Brook which empty into Buttermilk Creek and Cattaraugus Creek.

Another concern of the CTF is the presence of the state and national disposal areas on a plateau adjacent to the **WVDP**. They are unlined trenches that were filled with mostly low-level radioactive material including radioactive hospital waste.

The greatest concern is that while the Department of Energy and **New York State Energy Research and Development Authority** are actively managing the radioactive landfills they too might be breached and release radioactive material into the creeks, which eventually empty into Lake Erie and Lake Ontario.

Vaughan said during Wednesday's CTF Zoom video meeting that the task force should be able to consult with independent experts before the issues of concern are addressed in the SEIS and there is only six months to analyze and respond with comments.

Joe Patti, another one of the original CTF members from 1996 wondered how to pay for the expert advice. "My feeling is that there should be a slow and steady cleaning of the entire site. Start cleaning up in one corner and keep going."

Vaughan said the working group may have to rely on pro bono experts working for free on a volunteer basis from area universities and the private sector.

Partial cleanup?

What if DOE and **NYSERDA** are talking about a partial cleanup of the site, one meeting participant asked?

Another CTF member, Pat Townsend, who represents the League of Women Voters, said most area universities "don't know anything about **West Valley**," which is part of the local, state and national history.

John Hood, a representative of Erie County government, said now "is a good time to say where we are now and make sure the agencies know where we are."

Vaughan noted that the agencies can't commit to a full cleanup of the site until after the Phase 2 studies are complete.

Vaughan was very interested in seeing data from a company hired by the DOE to model future possible erosion at the site using a probabilistic performance assessment in order to see how extreme weather events — heavy rain that causes flash flooding — may impact **WVDP** site facilities including the underground tanks and the state and NRC low-level landfills.

The contract with the company, Neptune, expired before they could complete their work and speak to the Citizens Task Force. "We would welcome getting that information," Vaughan said.

The draft report from the SEIS working group is available on the West Valley Citizens Task Force Website:

https://www.westvalleyctf.org/2022_Materials/03/2022-03-23_Vaughan_Presentation.pdf

(Contact reporter Rick Miller at rmiller@oleantimesherald.com. Follow him on Twitter, @RMillerOTH)