

The Editorial Board: There's progress at West Valley, but major obstacles to remediation remain

News Editorial Board



Demolition is to start in September on the Main Plant Process Building at the West Valley Demonstration Project.

It is easy to forget that scenic Cattaraugus County destinations such as Zoar Valley, Ashford Hollow and Ellicottville are also located within 25 miles of the only privately owned nuclear fuel reprocessing center to have ever operated in the U.S.

Nuclear Fuel Services ran its plant in the town of Ashford from 1963 to 1972. After the reprocessing operations, no longer profitable, ceased, the company's lease expired in 1980. Ashford – and anywhere else the toxic material could travel – was left with 600,000 gallons of liquid high-level nuclear waste.

The site was acquired by New York state and renamed the **West Valley Demonstration Project** by an Act of Congress, with the U.S. Department of Energy directed to oversee removal and decontamination. Thus began a clean-up battle that's been going on for 42 years and counting. Progress has, very slowly, been made, and it looks like another major milestone is being reached this year: the removal, scheduled for September, of the Main Plant Process Building, the last major facility remaining at the site.

We wish that we could, with confidence, say that victory is close at hand. We wouldn't be so foolhardy, because we've heard it all before.

In 1989, the two operators of the clean-up, U.S. Department of Energy and the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, suggested that the site might be fully remediated, with the waste safely secured, by 2000.

That didn't happen. And now, in August of 2022, longtime activist Joanne Hameister of East Aurora is saying, "I'm 80 years old now. I'm not going to see that place cleaned up. I won't."

Hameister's stark realism aside, the Main Plant removal is good news. Contamination in the structure had already been reduced by 98%. With this building gone, there are still underground contaminants, a waste tank farm and more to be dealt with, but it is a major step forward. As John Pfeffer, Town of Ashford supervisor said, "I think it means progress."

The **West Valley Demonstration Project** was also intended to act as a pilot project for the remediation of high-level nuclear waste, presumably so other, similar clean-up efforts might learn from the methods and technology used. Hence the use of the word "demonstration."

Indeed, much has been demonstrated here. Farms were lost when land was initially taken over for the reprocessing plant. Workers at that plant developed cancer, leukemia and other illnesses. Creeks that flow into Lake Erie are either contaminated or at risk of contamination.

It must be admitted that – \$3.1 billion later – 51 of 55 structures have been destroyed, 1.3 million cubic feet of low-level radioactive waste has been shipped off-site and 30,000 cubic feet of transuranic (a radioactive element that has an atomic number higher than uranium) waste has been solidified.

But the transuranic and other high-level waste has not found a repository authorized to accept it and, for now, must remain at West Valley, where estimates of the time it can be kept there are limited to 50 years.

West Valley has provided an eloquent demonstration of what happens when private industry is allowed by government to take such untested risks, endangering human lives and the surrounding environment. Few scientists understood the full implications of nuclear reprocessing in 1963.

According to a recent report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office, Congress must once again take up the question about how the Department of Energy should finally deal with West Valley's most dangerous waste, a question that must be resolved before the site can be decommissioned. New legislation may be necessary.

There is no possibility that the community surrounding this site can ever be made fully whole, but final remediation – as far as it can be taken – deserves urgent and aggressive attention from every government entity involved.

Over the past decades, West Valley has generated enough media articles, government studies, expert opinions and reports from activist groups for at least one book. It is a case study that should be carefully reviewed by anyone promoting the installation of nuclear facilities anywhere.