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Hanford contractor finishes final job before contract ends

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August 11, 2016

RICHLAND, Wash. (AP) - The company working to clean up radioactive waste at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation has exceeded expectations before its contract with the U.S. Department of Energy ends.

A media outlet reports that Washington Closure removed 80 waste-filled buried pipes well ahead of schedule.

The landfill, which is considered one of Hanford's most hazardous areas, had been scheduled as one of the last environmental cleanup tasks along the Columbia River.

Washington Closure was able to remove 80 vertically buried pipes from a waste burial ground. The goal had been to finisher removing just 28 by the contract's end.

Once Washington Closure leaves Hanford, CH2M Hill Plateau Remediation Co. will finish up the work at a different waste burial ground.

Hanford for decades made plutonium for nuclear weapons.

Moab Tailings Project Committee to ask state to provide some funding to help with UMTRA mill tailings cleanup project

[The Times-Independent](#)

August 11, 2016

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The Moab Uranium Mill Tailings Remedial Action Project (UMTRA) has faced a year of changes, according to an annual report by the Department of Energy (DOE), which oversees cleanup of the former Atlas Uranium mill tailings site north of Moab. Although the project hit a milestone this year — having relocated half the 16 tons of contaminated material at the Cold War-era site by February — cuts in federal funding caused reductions in staff, slowing the pace on the cleanup and pushing its probable end date from 2019 to the early 2030s, according to Grand County UMTRA liaison Lee Shenton.

Now, Grand County Council member Mary McGann, who also serves as the chairwoman of the Moab Tailings Project Steering Committee, is hoping to convince Utah legislators to provide some funding for UMTRA.

Shenton said during the Aug. 2 Grand County Council meeting that for several years, the project had an annual budget of approximately \$40 million, allowing the shipment of four containers of tailings per week to the permanent disposal site near Crescent Junction.

But in 2012, funding for the project was significantly reduced and the budget has not returned to the \$40 million mark since. The project is expected to receive just \$34.7 million in fiscal year 2017, resulting in the slowdown in operations and cuts in staff, Shenton said.

“After a significant reduction in funding back in 2012 and inadequate funding since then to keep up with the ongoing needs ... It got to the point where they had to make a tough choice,” Shenton said. “That is, keep shipping four trains a week but shut down operations for three to four months a year, or reduce the staff and ship two trains a week. And they chose the latter.”

After 31 employees were released in April, the project contractor, Portage Inc., created a roving crew that loads and unloads tailings between the Moab mill site and the Crescent Junction disposal site.

“A ‘roving’ crew now loads the train one day in Moab and unloads the train the next workday at the Crescent Junction disposal site,” the DOE’s annual report stated.

Shenton told the council that reduced funding has also affected the shipment of mill debris — larger items that were found buried within the tailings pile — which will now be partially transported by truck to Crescent Junction on U.S.191.

“With the current funding situation and the employees they have available, they have decided to start shipping some of [the mill debris] by truck ...,” Shenton said. “The impact will be approximately one or two trucks per hour. So it’s not huge a load, but it will be noticeable. They do have to follow [U.S. Department of Transportation] requirements for securing the loads and protecting the general public.”

There are several initiatives underway to restore funding for the UMTRA site, Shenton said, including asking the Utah Legislature to fund \$5 million towards the project.

“Our steering committee chair Mary McGann is leading one initiative to attempt to secure some additional funding from the State of Utah on the grounds that not only is it good for the state, it would be certainly good for Grand County ... but in every other case where there was an UMTRA project, the state was a partner and paid a small portion of the cost of doing the remediation,” Shenton said.

However, the DOE’s annual report states that an extra \$5 million would “not be sufficient” to return to shipping four trains of tailings per week. According to the report, Moab UMTRA would need a sustained annual budget of \$45 million, adjusted for inflation, to return to the previous shipping schedule of four weekly trains.

The report did state that \$5 million would be put to use excavating a larger portion of phase three of the disposal cell and addressing aging infrastructure and equipment needs.

Phillip Goble, the Uranium Mills and Radioactive Materials section manager for the Utah Division of Waste Management and Radiation Control, said he does not expect the Legislature to fund Moab UMTRA.

Although Goble said the state was involved with the Atlas mill cleanup “at the very beginning,” once it was determined that the tailings had to be moved — which required a much larger financial commitment — the state backed away from the project.

In order to be a cooperating agent at an UMTRA site, Goble said, a state typically provides 10 percent of the cleanup costs while the DOE covers the additional 90 percent. That would be cost prohibitive at this point, he said.

“The estimated cleanup cost at the time [of the Atlas closing] was \$800 million. Now it’s at a billion dollars. It [would] cost upwards of \$100 million for the state,” Goble said. “ ... Expecting the state’s going to come up with money from the emergency fund — I just don’t see it.”

Goble argued that during the Cold War the federal government allowed environmental hazards to occur at uranium mills and the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission was simply guaranteeing a price for uranium at the time.

“Even though [uranium] wasn’t worth that much, they set a price because they were trying to win a nuclear war with Russia,” Goble said. “The environmental protections in place were nonexistent because they were trying to win a war.”

Regarding state funding for the Atlas cleanup, Goble said, "there are priorities other than something the U.S. government basically allowed to happen."

Although the odds might be against state funding, McGann said she is working to get \$5 million from the state to help accelerate the project's pace. She said she will meet with state Sen. David Hinkins (R-Orangeville) and possibly Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) in early September.

"The committee is working on getting \$5 million from the state for the ongoing duration of the project. Maybe that would help convince the DOE to throw in another \$5 million," McGann said. "It might be lofty but we're going to work really hard on it."

Read more: [Moab Times-Independent - Moab Tailings Project Committee to ask state to provide some funding to help with UMTRA mill tailings cleanup project](#)

Small reactor siting decision will have \$2.8 billion local impact

[Local News 8](#)

August 12, 2016

IDAHO FALLS, Idaho (KIFI/KIDK) - The decision to name the Idaho National Laboratory the preferred site for construction and operation of the NuScale Small Modular Reactor project could have a significant impact on the Idaho Falls economy.

Idaho Falls Mayor Rebecca Casper commissioned an economic analysis from the Idaho Department of Labor.

"I really have a personal conviction that this is the right thing to do. Green or carbon-free base load energy elevates the quality of life for anyone who gets to participate in it," said Casper.

The city of Idaho Falls currently runs off of 95 percent clean energy. The proposed project gets the city closer to 100 percent.

"It's not just a test reactor. This one will actually have kilowatts, megawatts in this case that will go into the grid. In UAMP's case, it will help them to replace their aging coal facilities that are shutting down due to the extreme regulatory regime that is happening right now," said Jackie Flowers, with Idaho Falls Power.

According to the study, the first construction phase of the project will cost \$2.8 billion and directly support up to 1,000 jobs. Construction would create or sustain an additional 11,808 jobs in the local economy.

Labor income was expected to increase by \$1.5 billion with a combined average wage of \$44,937, and combined industry sales would increase by \$3.8 billion over the course of the construction project.

Once complete, the project would support 360 jobs annually. It would also generate another 1,147 support jobs. Together, that would increase labor income by \$98 million, with average earnings of \$65,324 per job.

"There's a lot of interest in this, not just regionally but globally, as you have developing countries that are trying to move up the economic ladder," said Flowers.

DOE responds to new WIPP leak theory

[LA Monitor](#)

August 15, 2016

The Environmental Management Los Alamos Field Office of the Department of Energy responded this week to a former Los Alamos

National Laboratory physicist's alternate theory about what caused a 2014 radiation leak at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in Carlsbad.

The DOE is standing by its initial analysis of what happened to cause the rupture of a barrel of transuranic waste Feb. 14, 2014.

"The overarching conclusion of the technical assessment team was that specific chemical contents inside one particular drum, in combination with physical configuration of the materials led to a chemical reaction that breached the drum," said Steve Horak, a communications specialist with the DOE Environmental Management Field Office in Los Alamos. "A separate DOE board of experts and an independent expert board confirmed these results and we see no reason to question them now."

The DOE concluded that the barrel was packed with an organic kitty litter, that when combined with the contents inside the barrel, set off a reaction that eventually blew the lid of the barrel and spread the waste throughout the room, an underground, salt-lined chamber. The chamber has since been closed off and shut down along with the rest of the plant.

An official report on the incident from the DOE concluded the barrel at WIPP leaked and exploded because it was packed with the wrong type of material.

WIPP was shuttered following the incident and remains closed.

The drum, known as Drum 68660, was shipped from LANL. It was stored in Panel 7, Room 7 at WIPP.

Former LANL physicist Charles Bowman released a report and gave a lecture at a LANL workshop in Santa Fe last week, saying the chemical reaction had nothing to do with the type of kitty litter used in the drum.

“The gist of our Santa Fe talk is that the DOE missed a more likely reason for the barrel explosion than the spontaneous combustion mechanism described in its 300-page final report,” Bowman said. “We described publicly for the first time, measurements performed at the TUNL (Triangle Universities National Laboratories) lab at Duke University that showed that the alpha particles from decay of plutonium and americium slowed down in the barrel waste material and generated sufficient gases to pressurize the barrel at WIPP room temperature to its bursting point.”

He also said the reaction taking place inside the barrel was not one that produced heat inside the barrel. Rather, the actual explosion took place outside the barrel.

“Because both hydrogen and carbon monoxide burn in oxygen, the gas mixture also was explosive,” Bowman said. “So when the top burst off of the barrel from over pressure, we believe that a spark from the violent scraping of metal against metal ignited the cold gas,” Bowman said.

In its report, the DOE’S Accident Investigation Board concluded that the explosion was heat-based, and the fire was started when other packing materials caught fire within and without the barrel due to the gases mixing and combusting.

“The visual evidence associated with the identified breach was consistent with an exothermic reaction within drum 68660. This reaction resulted in internal heating of drum that led to internal pressure buildup of combustible gases within the drum which exceeded the drum venting capacity,” according to the board report. “The drum lid extruded beyond the lid retention ring, deflected the lid, and resulted in rapid release of the materials from the drum. The combustible gases and solids ignited which then spread to other combustible materials within the waste array, i.e., fiberboard and polyethylene slip sheets, reinforcement plates, stretch wrap, cardboard stiffeners and polypropylene super sack fabric.”

Bowman urged the DOE to reexamine its findings to fix what he said is a fundamental flaw in the packaging and disposal of radioactive waste.

“As matters now stand, explosive gas generation in WIPP will continue for millennia,” Bowman said. “This is a serious problem for the self-sealing, much advertised advantage of low-level waste storage in a salt deposit that will hermetically seal the explosive gas causing growing gas pressure with no means for release until it reaches the 2000-psi pressure of the overburden. However the most immediate danger at WIPP was created by the walling off of the room D7R7 where the exploding barrel was located and where 10,000 other gas-generating barrels are now isolated from WIPP’s improved ventilation system.”

The DOE Accident Investigation Board said, on the other hand, that the flaw was actually in LANL not following proper packing procedures.

“Failure of Los Alamos National Security, LLC (The company that manages LANL) to implement effective processes for procedure development, review, and change control. Execution of the Waste Characterization, Reduction, and Repackaging Facility... resulted in a combination of incompatible materials and the generation of an ignitable, noncompliant waste,” was just one of 12 flaws the AIB saw in LANL’s packing procedures.

Bowman hoped his talk at the Aug. 5 workshop would have resulted in either the New Mexico Environment Department or the DOE getting in touch with him. He said that so far, they have not.

“We expected that the NMED would have been in close contact with the DOE on this matter, but we have never received any response from either organization,” he said.

NMED did not respond to a request for comment about Bowman’s report.

Sick nuclear workers need answers, national board says

[The State](#)

August 10, 2016

COLUMBIA, SC -- Members of a federal health advisory board expressed frustration Wednesday that the government has failed for years to decide whether many ex-Savannah River Site employees should be compensated for the life-threatening illnesses the workers contracted while on the job.

Some SRS workers have waited more than a decade to learn whether they will receive benefits to help pay medical bills after they were exposed to radiation at the nuclear weapons plant near Aiken. Attorneys for many ex-employees have petitioned the government to declare those working at SRS after 1972 to be eligible for benefits.

The federal Advisory Board on Radiation and Worker Health must make a recommendation to the government on the request to provide benefits. But critics say a federal agency charged with providing data to the board has done a poor job of keeping the panel informed.

During a meeting Wednesday, advisory board chairman James Melius and board member Brad Clawson said some workers have waited too long for answers on whether they will receive compensation.

"It is sort of a fundamental issue, I think, of fairness," Melius said. "Somebody submits a petition, there ought to be some timely completion of the information that would allow the board to even evaluate" the matter.

At issue is a federal program many say is so complicated that deserving workers can't get compensation the government promised them for illnesses they suffered as a result of working at atomic weapons complexes across the country. Ex-workers and their families are eligible for benefits of up to \$400,000.

But getting records to prove the doses of radiation each worker received has been difficult. For that reason, the government can declare that all

workers are eligible if the presence of a nuclear material is unquestioned. The government did that in 2012 for those who worked at SRS in 1972 and earlier. Lawyers are seeking the same status for those who worked there after 1972.

Clawson said former SRS workers and their families are being hurt by the delay in deciding whether to declare that status. Some are dying before getting word on whether they'll receive benefits, he said.

"I'm at my wits' end," Clawson said. "I don't know which way to be able to go."

Who is responsible for the delay is a matter of dispute.

Both Melius and Clawson stopped short of blaming the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, or NIOSH, for failing to provide records to the board. But lawyers representing sick workers at SRS didn't have any trouble making that argument. They accused the agency of dragging its feet.

The attorneys late last year received more than 1,300 pages of previously classified government documents that they say make the case to compensate the workers. South Carolina lawyer Josh Fester said NIOSH has had records needed by the advisory board for at least four years.

"NIOSH has had access to these documents," Fester told the advisory board.

The occupational safety agency, in a statement after Wednesday's meeting, indicated it is not to blame for the delays and has done its best to provide information. But the agency declined to respond directly to criticism.

"I would rather not provide an opinion about the fairness of the criticism," said Stuart Hinnefeld, director of the agency's Division of Compensation Analysis and Support. In an email to The State, he said "there have been

times when we have had trouble getting information from the Department of Energy, but it would be unfair to say that's the only reason for the delay."

Fester, along with lawyers Bob Warren and Warren Johnson, say the government needs to declare most of the SRS workers who were exposed to thorium after 1972 eligible for federal benefits. Based on the advisory board's opinion, the federal government in 2012 declared those working there before 1973 eligible for benefits because of thorium exposure.

The documents the lawyers obtained show that thorium, a radioactive metal that can cause cancer, existed in larger quantities on the site than federal officials previously had admitted. But the U.S. Department of Energy didn't have a screening program strong enough to determine if an individual worker's exposure contributed to his or her illness, said Warren, a lawyer from Black Mountain, N.C.

Both Warren and Johnson said it's encouraging that the advisory board heard their criticism, but Johnson said he's also heard that before.

"That's the attitude we've had since the beginning: that we'll work on it," Johnson said.
