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Cleanup proceeding at Paducah plant

The Associated Press

PADUCAH, Ky. - Cleanup work continues at the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant even as state and federal regulators settle details of the plan to remove all hazardous waste at the site, according to the man in charge of cleaning up the plant.

Cleanup manager Bill Murphie gave an update during a Paducah Area Chamber of Commerce breakfast Thursday and in an interview later with the Paducah Sun.

"There are some issues, concerns and problems, and there is some ongoing discussion with the regulators about exactly what the long-term scope of work will be," he said. "But in the meantime, we aren't just sitting here. There are real activities happening."

Last month, the U.S. Department of Energy signed an agreement with the Kentucky Natural Resources Cabinet and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to outline work that must be completed by 2005. That ended more than a year of squabbling over DOE's plan to accelerate cleanup by setting one final milestone of 2010 and focusing on key problem areas.

The agreement requires the three agencies to renegotiate a detailed plan by Sept. 15 for removing all hazardous waste. Murphie said the Energy Department is working to meet that deadline.

Murphie outlined the ongoing work at the site:

- More than 71/2 tons of the now-banned degreaser trichloroethylene has been removed from beneath a cleaning building thought to be the leading contaminator of acres of groundwater. The project began Feb. 14 to study heating the TCE, vacuuming it to the surface and treating it with carbon. The Energy Department hopes the process will prove efficient for large-scale use to remove key sources of the chemical.
- The plant, which has 29,000 tons of scrap metal covering about 26 acres, is removing an average of 200 tons weekly, with plans to increase that to about 250 tons by October. DOE is doing an environmental study before deciding whether to remove a ban on the commercial use of the metal, which the Paducah Area Community Reuse Organization wants to recycle.
- About 2,600 feet of old water lines have been removed from a ditch contaminated from runoff in early years of plant operation. Workers will replace contaminated soil with clean material.
- Since last fall, enough waste to fill 8,600 55-gallon drums has been shipped to disposal sites in the Southwest, and more than three times that much will be shipped through Sept. 30.

- Seventy-five people are going through the "very time-consuming task" of checking 400,000 cubic feet of old materials stored in current plant work areas.
- Acid tanks are being dismantled in two closed buildings once used to make uranium hexafluoride (UF₆) and "feed" it into the plant enrichment process. The tanks will be reused by a cleanup firm called ToxCo, saving governmental cleanup costs.
- Next month, contractor Uranium Disposition Services will start preliminary design of a 160-job plant to recycle about 38,000 cylinders of spent UF₆ stored at the plant. Federal law requires groundbreaking to start by July 31, 2004, and the plant is supposed to be operational by March 2006. It will annually convert 1,500 to 1,700 cylinders of UF₆ into safer material that may have commercial use.

The plant opened in 1953 to enrich uranium into nuclear fuel. There is widespread soil and groundwater contamination from nuclear waste buried in landfills and chemicals used to clean equipment. In 1988, DOE began to identify the problems and prepare a cleanup plan.