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Nuclear cleanup costs expected to skyrocket at Parks

By Mary Ann Thomas, ASPINWALL HERALD
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Parks dump site
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Coming up

Who: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

What: Informational meeting on cleanup at Parks nuclear waste site.

When: 7 p.m., March 14

Where: Parks Township Volunteer Fire Department, 1119 Dalmatian Dr., Parks.

About the writer

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The cleanup costs for the nuclear waste dump in Parks Township are expected to soar from \$170 million to at least \$250 million and maybe as much as half a billion dollars because of recently discovered complexities of the site and safety considerations.

The Army Corps of Engineers will update residents on the cleanup during a public meeting later this month at the Parks Township Volunteer Fire Department.

The waste dump, currently owned by BWX Technologies (Babcock & Wilcox) was active from about 1960 to the early 1970s receiving nuclear and chemical waste from the former Nuclear Materials and Equipment Corp. in Apollo and Parks, which produced nuclear fuel for submarines and a range of nuclear products for the government and private industry.

After starting and stopping excavation last year in two of 10 waste trenches on the 44-acre site along Route 66, the agency is revising its cleanup plans and budget and changing contractors.

After the first shovel hit the dirt last summer to dig out the first trenches, more than nuclear waste hit the fan.

Worked stopped at the Parks site in October after workers for the prime contractor, Cabrera Services, of East Hartford, Con., allegedly mishandled some nuclear waste in barrels, according to the Corps.

The contractor violated safety procedures that were in place to prevent too much radioactive material from being placed close together, potentially causing a chain reaction that could release unsafe levels of radiation. The situation is known as a "criticality."

Although no one was hurt, a criticality can cause severe radiation exposure to workers and contamination of the environment.

The Corps held a public meeting soon after the incident to tell residents about the work stoppage and its investigation of the incident.

CONTRACTOR PROBLEMS

The breach of the safety procedures last summer was significant enough to end the Corps contract with Cabrera.

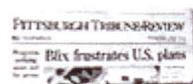
"The contractor made some mistakes and they didn't follow the work plan we agreed on to keep everybody safe," said Col. Butch Graham, commander of the Corps Pittsburgh District. "We're unhappy with their performance."



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Phone calls to Cabrera headquarters were not returned for this story.

Although Cabrera's contract runs until March of 2013, the Corps is "de-scoping" their work -- ending their contract early.

Cabrera will be on site but will be limited to completing processing of materials already dug out of the trenches, said Graham.

The Corps doesn't expect to start digging in the trenches again until sometime in 2013, while the agency looks for a new contractor.

"We're in the process of understanding what we've dug up to date," said Graham. "We planned for a range of contingencies that we expected mostly at the lower end of the complexity scale. And with what we dug up so far, we learned that we will be working more regularly with more complex material and that will drive how we prepare this next contract."

Graham declined to specify what kind of radioactive contaminants were causing the cleanup complexities.

But NUMEC discarded a variety of radiologically contaminated scrap, a range of enrichments of uranium, plutonium, thorium and a host of chemicals. A number of site studies suggest that some of the trench contents have commingled by now, posing other cleanup challenges.

Graham stressed that the new cost reflects slow-moving operations guided by safety.

"We're focused on safeguarding the workers and the community, not the speed of production," he said.

The clean-up project of an estimated 50,000 tons of nuclear and chemical waste that will be shipped to Clive, Utah, could now take up to a decade.

Last week, the Corps presented information on the waste dump for prospective new contractors during a waste management conference in Phoenix, Arizona.

"We've learned a lot and are looking at the contractor talent out there and want to hire the best," Graham said.

The Corps named Maj. Dan Elliott as senior project manager, Kevin Logan as a special project manager focused on overseeing the contract development and solicitation, while Bill Lenart will still remain a project manager.

A PROBLEMATIC DIG

Planning the excavation and shipping of commingled nuclear and chemical waste dumped next to small, rural village, a river and highway, has been a long and recently problematic process for the Corps.

Previous company and government-generated studies of the waste dump stressed that disposal standards were lax while the dump was in use and that documentation of exactly what was deposited in the trenches was scant.

The Corps is the only agency to actually try to remove the contaminants since the possibility was raised of cleaning up the waste site more than two decades ago.

Then, the responsible parties - owner Babcock & Wilcox; predecessor, the Atlantic Richfield Company, and the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission -- were considering leaving the waste on site, which would have remained dangerous for tens of thousands of years.

Frustrated with the government's plans and prodded by Leechburg environmental activist Patty Ameno, the late Rep. John Murtha drafted legislation that pulled the cleanup project from the site owners and the NRC and put the Army Corps in the lead in 2002.

The Parks nuclear waste dump is one of 24 active sites in 10 states in the Corp's Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program, a cleanup program for radioactive contamination from the Manhattan Project, the top secret project that produced the world's first atomic bombs, and early U.S. Atomic Energy Commission operations.

After years of study, the Corps estimated in 2007 that the cleanup would take about three years and cost about \$44.5 million.

Closer to actual excavation, that cost increased to \$76 million by early 2010. Then, the project ballooned to \$170 million as the Corps prepped the Parks site for the cleanup with a new access road, water treatment plant and a 150-foot-by-400-foot materials handling building in 2010 and 2011.

With the latest problems at the site and the need for new procedures, the new cost estimates put the price tag at up to 11 times greater than the original estimate.



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