Chemical Site Eyed for Renewable Energy

ALEX DOMINGUEZ, Associated Press

One of Delaware's most troubled environmental sites, the abandoned Metachem site, is being considered by state and federal officials for its potential to produce clean energy.

The 65-acre site near Delaware City is being paved over to keep chemicals spilled at the plant from continuing to leach into groundwater. That has limited possible reuses for the property, which was the site of several large chemical spills and was placed on the federal Environmental Protection Agency's list of most hazardous waste sites in 1987.

Originally owned by Standard Chlorine of Delaware, and later Metachem, the plant manufactured chlorinated benzene compounds from 1966 to 2002. Several large spills have occurred at the site, including a 1986 spill of 569,000 gallons of volatile organic compounds. Chemicals from the spill have been found in groundwater, soil, creek sediments, surface water and nearby wetlands, leading to a fish consumption advisory for the Red Lion Creek.

Now, with the help of a new EPA program, solar panels could one day cover the site, providing an environmental benefit from a property that has been an environmental concern for decades, said Collin O'Mara, secretary of the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the National Renewable Energy Laboratory in Colorado announced earlier this month that they plan to assess 26 sites over the next 12 to 18 months. Other sites include an open-pit copper mine in southwestern New Mexico; a former lead smelter in Montana; and landfills in Arizona, Louisiana and New Jersey.

Gail Mosey, an NREL senior energy analyst, said at the unveiling in New Mexico that the project has the potential to use re-use contaminated sites instead of developing farmlands, forested areas or other currently undeveloped lands. The EPA is spending $1 million on the assessment in hopes of transforming the sites from eyesores to assets, federal officials say.

O'Mara said state officials hope to have a system operating in the next few years at the former plant, where capping is expected to be completed about 2016.

The site's industrial history works to its advantage because a strong infrastructure already is in place, the environmental secretary said.

The property is surrounded by manufacturing sites that could use the power as well as utility lines that could accept power from the site for use throughout the region.

"So, there are a lot of options for where the electrons could flow," O'Mara said.

Environmentalists were cautiously optimistic.

Members of the Delaware Nature Society, which has tracked the remediation effort for years, said the idea has promise as long as it doesn't negatively affect efforts to contain contaminants on the property.

Seth Ross, a retired DuPont engineer who has been one of the Delaware Nature Society's leaders in following the remediation, said the contaminants are not expected to break down in the soil for 50 to 100 years. Knowing that, Ross said he wanted to ensure that the contamination underground is not forgotten. He said it's essential to closely monitor the cap over the years.

"Any cap is going to crack, develop cracks, and there has to be a program to follow that and keep it repaired," Ross said.

O'Mara said the state was looking into if the panels could be placed on the site without disturbing the cap. The fact that the site's neighbors are also industrial means the "not-in-my-backyard" complaints often associated with running power lines to alternate energy sites are not likely.

Brenna Goggin, the Delaware Nature Society's environmental advocate, said she was hopeful the site could serve as a model for cleanup spots elsewhere.

"Just because you have these severely contaminated sites that you don't know what to do with, perhaps there are ways to put renewable energy sources on them so that at least something beneficial comes out of this," Goggin said.

Online: EPA Metachem fact sheet —
www.epa.gov/reg3hwmd/npl/DED041212473.htm#background *[1]*

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