US Northwest communities alter Cold War economies

SHANNON DININNY - Associated Press - Associated Press

In a remote pocket of the inland Pacific Northwest, World War II weapons production and storage built a booming economy that continued through the Cold War. The region flourished even as efforts shifted toward cleanup and disposal of chemical agents and radioactive waste.

Today, the rockets and mustard agent are gone from northeast Oregon's Umatilla Chemical Depot. Across the Columbia River in southeast Washington state, work to rid the highly contaminated Hanford nuclear reservation of pollutants will continue for decades, but federal stimulus dollars spurred the completion of some projects and more completions are expected in months to come.

The success of those efforts means thousands of job losses in communities that shined through the economic downturn and a major shift for a region long fueled by federal dollars.

Fred Kremmer, 49, of Richland, Washington, worked at Hanford for nearly 10 years. There were layoffs, but new jobs always followed — until he was let go again in September.

"I would hope to go back, but I doubt there will be work for me there again. That's my gut feeling," he said.

At the height of World War II, the federal government enlisted 50,000 people for a hush-hush project to build the atomic bomb, making a remote stretch of land Washington state's fourth-largest city. The Hanford site went on to produce plutonium for the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal for decades, employing thousands of people and establishing the area as a science and technology center.

Work shifted to cleaning up the highly contaminated site in the 1990s. The number of employees there has averaged about 10,000 for several years, but 2,000 workers have been laid off in recent months as work was completed with $1.96 billion from the federal stimulus bill.

Work to empty underground tanks of radioactive waste and to glassify that waste will continue for decades at Hanford, but more layoffs are expected next year and beyond, as other cleanup projects get completed and federal cleanup dollars decline.

Across the river, storage for rockets, ammunition and other military supplies was whittled out of 30 square miles (78 square kilometers) of sagebrush several hours drive east of Portland, Oregon. Eventually, the U.S. Army began storing chemical

weapons there in partly-buried earthen bunkers, referred to as "igloos."

The Umatilla depot once stored 12 percent of the United States' chemical weapons, including deadly VX nerve agent and blistering mustard agent.

Work to incinerate the weapons began seven years ago to meet a 2012 deadline imposed by international treaty, and it was completed last month. The roughly 1,200 workers there will gradually move on as buildings are removed over the next three years to four years.

Candice Bluechel, business services manager for a Washington state office that matches workers with available jobs, summed it up best: "The reality is that we will never be able to place everybody, and the kinds of work that will continue will be different — and almost certainly at reduced money."

Contractors at the two sites are aiding workers to find retraining and new positions, either within the community or at other federal sites. State programs are helping to pay for courses and training at local colleges.

URS Corp. managed the incinerator at Umatilla, maintains the contract to empty nuclear waste tanks at Hanford, and will run the treatment plant for that waste. The plant is scheduled to begin operating there by 2019, and hundreds of depot workers have been trained to work there.

"We knew from the beginning that this was a project that was going to come to a close," Umatilla County Commissioner Bill Hansell said. "We knew those jobs weren't going to be there forever."

Kremmer estimates his average Hanford salary at about $60,000. Now he's pursuing a degree in business administration and hoping to match that salary.

"I feel a little embarrassed because of my age. I should have gone to school when I was younger, but I chose a different path," he said. "I'm an ex-Hanford worker. It's hard to get back out in the market, the school world."

Layoffs aren't new to the region, which shares workers across the state line, but some say it may be better prepared for losses than in years past.

Agriculture is a driving force east of the Cascades: Some refer to the Tri-Cities as the "french fry capital" because of the many potato processing plants there. New health care and technology companies are hiring workers.

On the tourism front, hundreds of wineries have opened in the region, and recreational opportunities are expected to grow with additional access to the Hanford Reach, the last free-flowing stretch of the Columbia River, as more cleanup work gets done. Tours of the nation's first production nuclear reactor, B Reactor, drew 7,000 visitors from 28 countries, an estimated $1.5 million impact to the local economy.

For the communities, cleanup of the two sites is paving the way for renewal.

Hansell said destruction of the Umatilla chemicals enables the property to be turned into an asset. Plans for the site have yet to be determined, though local officials are hoping for some industrial development.

About 60 square miles (155 square kilometers) of the Hanford site, which is about half the size of the state of Rhode Island overall, are to be set aside for industrial development. Local officials are hoping the region's cheap hydropower, experienced work force and technical expertise will entice renewable energy companies to move to the Tri-Cities.

The Pacific Northwest National Laboratory, a national laboratory, already employs about 5,000 people there, lending to the area's clout as a science and technology hub.

The energy park can't replace all of the 10,000 jobs at Hanford, but the goal is to replace a third of them with energy-related, solid-paying jobs, said Gary Petersen, vice president of Hanford programs for TRIDEC, a local economic development group.

The ideas range from manufacturing solar panels or fuel cells to a biofuels plant.

"This community really does want to be the renewable energy hub. If it can't work here, we don't think it can work anywhere," he said.

John J. Accordino, a professor of urban and regional planning at Virginia Commonwealth University, has studied military base closures and how communities respond to the change.

Local officials should get "every penny, every dime" of state and federal assistance for planning the transition, he said, because it won't be there forever. Then, look to the future.

"If nobody is worried about keeping the past alive, that's half the battle in economic development," he said. "Everyone has to figure out the way to go now, and diversification is the way to go about it — build on what you have."

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