Cleanup of Closed Nuclear Fuel Plant Ongoing

HEMATITE, Mo. (AP) — The $200 million cleanup of the site of a long-defunct nuclear fuel plant in eastern Missouri is progressing, with soil contaminated with radioactive waste being shipped to a landfill in a desert in Idaho.

Westinghouse Electric Co. bought the plant in near Hematite in rural Jefferson County in 2000 and closed it a year later. Past owners of the plant had buried contaminated waste such as old equipment, gloves, shoe covers and overalls on the property in at least 40 unlined pits, the deepest of which is 26 feet, The St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported (http://bit.ly/SkPleU [1]).

The process of removing contaminated soil and refilling the holes with clean soil began in March and is expected to be finished in the summer, although the entire cleanup won't be completed until 2014, according to Bob Copp, the Westinghouse project manager. Pollution from heavy metals and other chemicals also contaminate the site.

Rail cars each loaded with 284,000 pounds of dirt are being hauled away to a landfill in the Owyhee Desert of Idaho. Each car load costs $23,000 to transport and store.

Copp, who moved from his home in Idaho Falls, Idaho, to oversee the cleanup, expects to remove about 2.3 million cubic feet of soil, with roughly half coming from the pits. About 28 acres of the 267-acre site require remediation.

Mallinckrodt Chemical Works opened the plant in 1956. It had several owners and it produced high-enriched nuclear fuel for the Navy's nuclear submarine and other reactor programs until 1974, according to the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission. From 1974 until 2001, it manufactured nuclear fuel rods for commercial power plants.

It's unclear what Westinghouse will do with the property once the cleanup is complete, Copp said. The NRC said it could be available for residential, agricultural and light industrial use.

Dennis Diehl, director of the Jefferson County Health Department, said he was pleased with how the cleanup has progressed.

"They've kept everybody informed on what's been going on," he said.

Past Hematite workers have received compensation from the federal government for being exposed to radiation at the plant. As of Monday, they had been paid more than $7.2 million, according to the U.S. Labor Department.

Information from: St. Louis Post-Dispatch, http://www.stltoday.com *[2]*

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