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Paul Keough, right, acting regional administrator for the EPA, explains cleanup plans Thursday at the F. O'Connor site in Augusta.

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Time frame for O'Connor cleanup — 27 years

By MIKE LABERGE
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EPA

AUGUSTA — It will cost $14.2 million and take an estimated 27 years to clean up a city scrapyard contaminated by chemicals dumped there more than two decades ago, environmental officials announced Thursday.

At a press conference outside the fenced-in site of the closed F. O'Connor yard on Route 17, officials from the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the state Department of Environmental Protection said the remedy will protect the health of people living nearby.

"The site may look OK from the road, but it houses a potential environmental disaster," said Elizabeth Armstrong, deputy commissioner of the DEP. "The decisions we have reached ultimately will make the land livable once again."

She said state and federal officials will negotiate with Central Maine Power Co. and the F. O'Connor Co. — the two firms responsible for the site — to pay for the cleanup.

"We're hopeful that CMP will help pay for the cleanup," Armstrong said.

From the early 1950s until 1978, workers at the scrapyard dismantled transformers from Central Maine Power Co. and dumped the oil used to keep them cool on the site.

Tests conducted by state and federal officials later revealed that chemicals in the oil — polychlorinated biphenyls or PCBs, and other compounds found to be toxic to people and animals — leached into soil and groundwater around the site.

It is among the most contaminated of the seven sites in Maine on the federal Superfund list, a compilation of the most hazardous waste sites in the country, said Paul Keough, acting regional administrator for the EPA.

Officials said no decisions had been made on how the $14.2 million tab would be divided, but the plan outlined Thursday

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> "The site may look OK from the road, but it houses a potential environmental disaster."
> Elizabeth Armstrong

O'Connor cleanup plans outlined by officials

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is more than twice as expensive as a proposal from CMP.

The utility said it was too soon to tell whether rate payers would foot the bill.

The cleanup, which officials expect to begin in 1991, entails treating soil and groundwater at the site to remove the hazardous chemicals.

The contaminated soil, 23,500 cubic yards of it, will be excavated and placed in a machine that operates like a high-tech cement mixer. A solvent added to the mixture will separate the chemicals from the soil, which will be returned to the site once it is determined to be non-hazardous. Once separated, the chemicals will be trucked out of state and burned.

The soil that cannot be cleaned to EPA standards will be taken to a landfill out of state.

That process should be completed by 1993, Keough said. More time consuming, he said, will be cleaning an estimated 1 million gallons of water on the site.

Under EPA's plan, contaminated groundwater will be pumped through a filter to remove solids and oil droplets. It then will go through a second filter that will treat it with carbon to remove chemicals and be pumped back into the ground.

Water now contained in lagoons on the site will be trucked off the site and treated elsewhere. That totals about 150,000 gallons.

The process will be time-consuming because some of the groundwater lies in bedrock and will be difficult to extract, said Michael Jasinski, project manager for the EPA. It will extract about a half a gallon of water a minute and will take about 27 years to complete, according to initial estimates.

"One thing people have to keep in mind is that these are estimates based on initial studies," Jasinski said. "It is hoped it will take significantly less time."

Residents had mixed reactions to the plan.

Harold Irish, who has lived on Cony Road for 20 years, said he thought it would ensure the safety of future generations.

"If the EPA says this is good and this is safe, I'll go along with them," said Irish, who said his son played at the site as a child and later died of leukemia.

"Eight people have died of cancer on this road in the last few years, but we don't know if it was caused by the junkyard," he said. "We have nothing against CMP or O'Connor. They didn't know at the time what they were dealing with.

"If it's safe, OK; but if it isn't safe, clean it up," he said.

Others said the cleanup would be a waste of money.

"I'm not really worried about it," said one woman, who asked not to be identified. "We're all going to die sometime. If it's not from this or from chemicals in the food we eat, it will be from something else."

During a public hearing this summer, EPA and CMP offered differing plans to clean up the site.

EPA's plan initially cost $13 million, while CMP's plan would have cost about $6 million. In addition, the power company's plan would have cleaned the level of PCBs on the site from 200,000 parts per million in some cases to about 10 parts per million.

CMP officials said their plan was adequate to protect public health, but EPA officials said the land would have been useful only as a landfill.

EPA's plan calls for cleaning the site so only one part per million of PCBs was left on the site. Keough said studies of the site conducted by the EPA, DEP and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concluded only that figure would protect public health.

"It is costly, but this is the mandate Congress has given us — to clean up these sites and protect the public health," said David Webster, who is in charge of the Superfund sites in Maine and Vermont.

CMP officials, while openly disappointed with the decision, said they will continue to cooperate with state and federal officials.

"We have an obligation to the health and safety of our customers," said Frank Chiaravalloti, spokesman for the company. "We proposed what we thought was a good plan to clean up the site and ensure public health."

He said the company would continue to negotiate with the DEP on a settlement.

"Whether we pay $6 million or $13 or $14 million has yet to be decided," he said. "Where the funds come from is a question our board of directors will decide."