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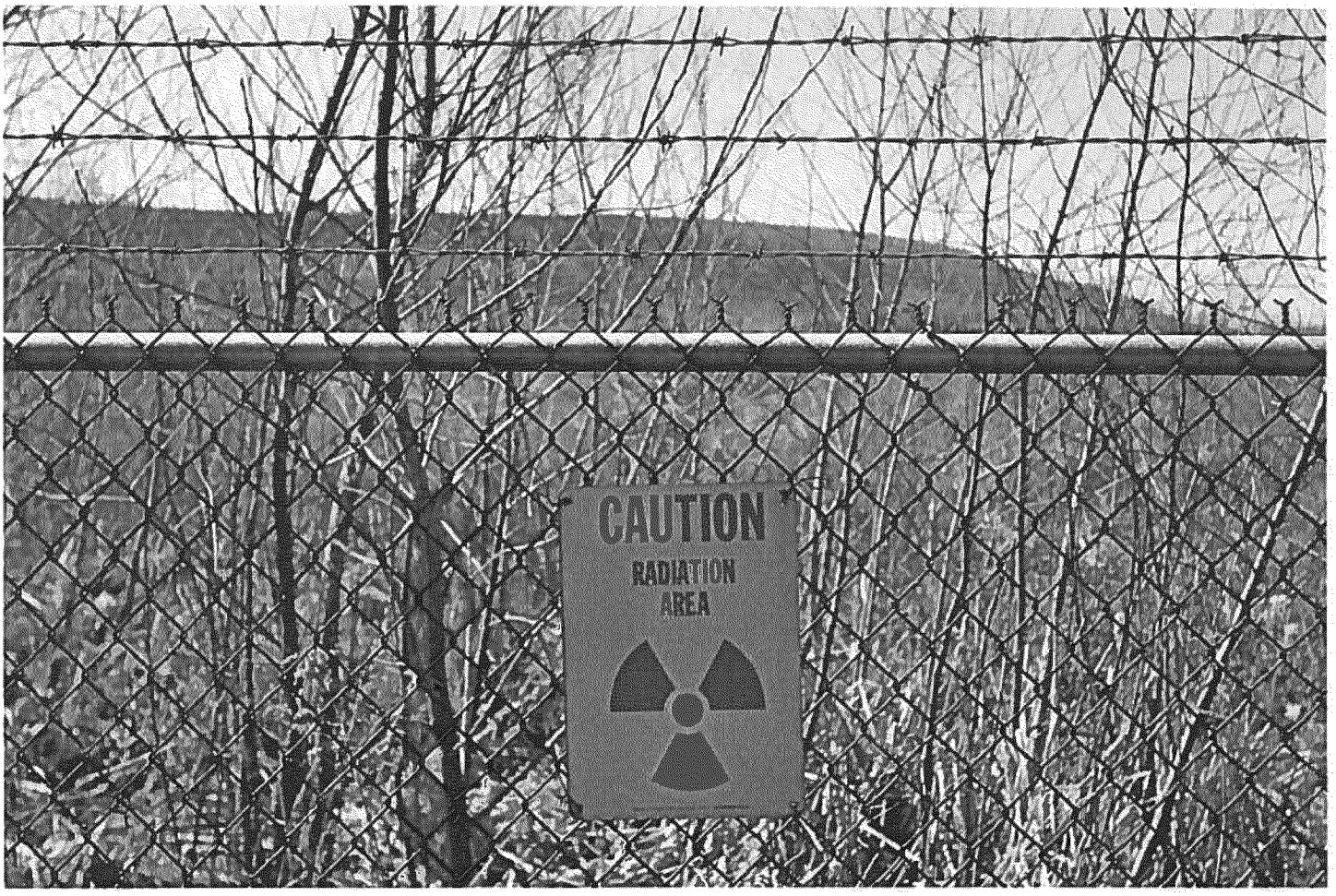
EPA says West Lake cleanup decision will miss deadline

By Bryce Gray St. Louis Post-Dispatch 3 hrs ago



Exterior shot showing a section of the West Lake landfill Tuesday March 13, 2012, in Bridgeton. The EPA is assessing whether to s to a 2008 plan to leave tons of Cold War era radioactive waste buried at the West Lake landfill or shift plans and excavate it. Phot Laurie Skrivan, lskrivan@post-dispatch.com

The Environmental Protection Agency announced Tuesday that it would miss a year-end deadline to select a cleanup plan for radioactive contamination at the West Lake Landfill Superfund site.

"We need to extend the deadline for proposing a final remedy," said EPA Region 7 Administrator Mark Hague.

"This is a very complex site," Hague continued. "We need to get this right and we will get it right."

There is not yet an adjusted timeline available for when a cleanup plan may be finalized.

The announcement was met with some criticism.

Rep. Ann Wagner, R-Ballwin, who along with Rep. William Lacy Clay, D-St. Louis, has advocated for legislation to transfer the site's cleanup to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, said the delay underscores the need for new management.

"It is reprehensible that the EPA has continued to drag their feet and not take responsibility for cleanup at the West Lake Landfill," a statement from Wagner said. "Today's announcement only reinforces why it is critical we transfer cleanup of the site from the EPA to the Army Corps."

On a separate matter, the agency also reaffirmed its statement from last week indicating that it would test residential areas surrounding West Lake Landfill "to address potential environmental health concerns in the area."

That announcement comes one week after a Bridgeton couple living about a half-mile away from the Superfund site filed a lawsuit alleging radioactive contamination of their home. Sampling will begin at that couple's house in the Spanish Village neighborhood and could possibly be expanded based on the agency's findings. The timeline for those testing efforts has yet to be determined, the EPA said.

"We have requested from the (plaintiffs') law firm that they provide us the data about the residence in question," said Hague. "We want to get that data to proceed with our own sampling efforts and inform what we do."

Hague maintained that the agency's monitoring efforts have not revealed any evidence of radioactive contamination migrating off site.

"We've had 13 monitors up and running around the site," said Hague. "That data has indicated that there is no contamination that is above any level of concern."

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The decision to conduct off-site sampling was applauded by Just Moms STL, a concerned citizens group that closely follows issues related to the landfill.

"We are encouraged that EPA has finally promised to do something about the radioactive waste scientists found in our homes," the group said in a statement.

The Missouri Coalition for the Environment, meanwhile, said the agency's announcements reflect that action is needed to ensure both the short- and long-term safety of the community.

"The EPA needs to be prepared to relocate families if they confirm residential radioactive contamination while preparing a plan for the removal of the illegally discarded radioactive wastes to ensure the long-term safety of the community and St. Louis region," said the organization's policy director, Ed Smith, in a released statement.

Bryce Gray

Reporter covering energy and the environment for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.