Fw: Clip 1 - St. Louis Post-Dispatch - EPA testing continues at radioactive waste site; critics unmoved
Cecilia Tapia to: DeAndre Singletary, Audrey Asher, Dan Gravatt 01/18/2013 09:39 AM

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David Bryan

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St. Louis Post-Dispatch -

10 hours ago • BY JEFFREY TOMICH
http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/epa-testing-continues-at-radioactive-waste-site-critics-unmoved/article_36c477a5-91e4-519a-81f7-b5bee1ee8662.html

BRIDGETON • More than four years after agreeing to a controversial plan to cap Cold War-era radioactive waste and leave it in place at a north St. Louis County landfill, the Environmental Protection Agency says testing continues at the site to validate the decision.

While there's still work to do —additional groundwater sampling and radiological screening — critics of the decision are skeptical the EPA will change its plans for the West Lake Landfill in Bridgeton. Many urged officials present at a public meeting Thursday night to rethink plans for the site. Others scolded the agency for its plan to leave the waste buried.

"It is simply not possible to conceive of a worse location to leave radioactive material," said Kay Drey, an activist from University City who has pushed the government for decades to clean up radiological waste left behind at sites across the region.

The EPA had scheduled Thursday's meeting to brief residents on its plan to address radioactive contamination spread across 40 acres in two locations at unused portions of the sprawling dump, located north of Interstate 70 and west of St. Charles Rock Road. The landfill is among several sites across the St. Louis area that are contaminated by radioactive waste from Mallinckrodt Chemical Co.'s uranium processing operations.

An estimated 300 North County residents, environmental and labor activists and Teamsters packed a large meeting room at the Machinists Union Hall for the first public meeting on the West Lake site in four years.

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The Missouri Coalition for the Environment, the Sierra Club and others say leaving the radiological waste in place in an unlined landfill in the Missouri River floodplain is asking for trouble. They say it poses a danger not only for groundwater in the area, but in the event of an earthquake or flood could foul the Missouri River — the source of drinking water for much of north St. Louis County.

Critics want the waste excavated and hauled to a licensed waste disposal facility, preferably by the Army Corps of Engineers, which is in the midst of doing similar projects at radiologically contaminated spots elsewhere in the area.

Some area residents and environmental groups take issue with a December groundwater study produced by a consultant working for the parties that have financial responsibility for the radiological waste, a group that includes the Department of Energy.

The report indicated there's no leaching of radioactivity from the landfill and suggested, based on a recent study from the U.S. Geological Survey, that high levels of radium-228, a radioactive isotope, were naturally occurring.

Robert Criss, a geochemist and Washington University professor who reviewed the study for the coalition, said its riddled with flaws. For example, he pointed to a reference to a testing well supposedly hydrologically upgradient from the contamination that's actually downgradient

Criss questioned the legitimacy of having parties responsible for the cleanup doing studies that affect the EPA's remedy.

"This is like asking a kid to write his own report card and paying him to do it," he said.

The EPA's existing plan, called a record of decision, was approved in 2008. It calls for leaving the contaminated soil in place and covering it with a mixture of clay and rubble and a vegetative cover. A groundwater monitoring system would surround the site.

The agency took a second look at the decision in 2010. The result was a 1,400-page supplemental study completed in December 2011. That report didn't include specific recommendations. Nor did it prompt the EPA to change its plan. The study said capping the waste and leaving it in the ground would cost $41 million — one-tenth of the cost of removing the waste and hauling it to a licensed disposal site in Utah.

Last year, however, the EPA's National Remedy Review Board — a panel that must approve Superfund cleanups in excess of $25 million — asked the agency's regional office in Kansas City to collect still more data and study other alternatives, including partial removal.

Chris Whitley, an EPA spokesman, said numerous factors will ultimately determine what solution is chosen. Cost is among them, along with protection of human health, the environment and efficacy, he said.

There's no timetable for the agency to render a final decision. Whitley said additional field tests will likely take months, not years.

But any delay is too long, according to some of those in attendance Thursday.

"You would think that from a PR aspect, (the federal government) would clean up the first nuclear waste in the world," said Byron Clemens, who grew up in north county and still owns land in the area. "You paid for it, we suffered from it, now move it out."