

March 26, 2015

SCHUMER, IN PERSONAL MEETING WITH FED OFFICIAL WHO WILL OVERSEE WEST VALLEY DEMONSTRATION PROJECT, PUSHES TO RESTORE FULL FUNDING FOR RADIOACTIVE WASTE CLEANUP AT THE CATTARAUGUS COUNTY SITE – PROGRAM HAS BEEN SHORTCHANGED FOR YEARS & CONTINUES TO POSE ENVIRONMENTAL RISK TO WNY

The West Valley Demonstration Project Needs at Least \$75 Million Per Year to Completely Clean Up the Out-of-Use Former Nuclear Site; Feds Previously Agreed This Funding Was Needed for 10 Years Beginning in 2008, But Program Has Not Been Funded At Necessary Levels Since

In Personal Meeting With Nominee To Lead Department of Energy's Office of Environmental Management, Monica Regalbuto, Schumer Urged Nominee to Support Full \$75 Million Funding Level for West Valley Cleanup in Future Years – Senator Vows To Fight To Secure Full \$75 Million Needed This Year

Schumer: Feds Must Not Balk at Commitment to Clean West Valley Site – DOE Nominee Must Prioritize West Valley Site's Funding

U.S. Senator Charles E. Schumer today announced that, during an in-person meeting, he urged the President's nominee for the Office of Environmental Management at the Department of Energy (DOE), Monica Regalbuto, to prioritize the complete cleanup of the West Valley Demonstration Project and support full federal funding for the effort, which has been short-changed for over five years. Schumer explained that the West Valley Demonstration Project needs an allocation of at least \$75 million per year for at least 10 years in order to complete the first phase of clean up at the out-of-use nuclear test site, but it has been continually underfunded over the past several years. In 2008, the DOE issued an Environmental Impact Statement which said that \$75 million per year in federal funding would be needed to begin cleaning up at a more economically efficient pace.

However, to date, the West Valley Demonstration Project has been significantly underfunded in the President's budget and by Congress. Each year since the Environmental Impact Statement was issued, the President has underfunded it in his Budget requests – despite the fact that it is still an environmental risk to the residents of Western New York. Additionally, despite the DOE's suggestion of \$75 million per year, in FY 2015, the West Valley site only received \$60 million for cleanup efforts; in 2014, it received \$66 million; in 2013, it received \$61 million; in 2012, it received \$66 million; and in 2011, it received \$59 million. Next year, in FY 2016, the funding could drop to the \$61 million that was proposed in the President's budget unless Congress increases funding. In Schumer's meeting with the President's nominee to oversee the DOE's Office of Environmental Management, Monica Regalbuto, Schumer said the short-changing of West Valley is out-of-step with other DOE cleanup sites, which have seen either sustained or increased funding.

"I met with the President's nominee to for the Office of Environmental Management and let her know in clear terms that we have not received a sufficient amount for West Valley clean-up and that we must fund the clean-up effort at \$75 million this year – and in the years ahead," said Senator Schumer. "Each year that the West Valley Demonstration Project goes underfunded, the amount of time and money it will take to decontaminate and remove the waste at the site increases. This program has been continually shortchanged, year after year, and the President's budget request for 2016 once again has come in far below what is necessary for this cleanup effort. The federal government cannot balk at its longstanding commitment to contain and restore the West Valley nuclear site," said Schumer. "That is why I am urging my colleagues in Congress to keep their promise to Western New York, where this site has become both a public health

and an environmental hazard, and restore full federal funding levels at \$75 million per year. I am also pushing the President's nominee to prioritize the clean-up and to understand that we need a larger commitment from the Administration in future years. Shortchanging this program will only, further delay the cleanup process, and jeopardize potential economic growth surrounding the site."

Schumer said that the President's budget request has not included enough money for the project in recent years and has continually fallen far short of the necessary \$75 million, which has resulted in subsequent Appropriations bills also underfunding this important project. This is why Schumer will be leading a letter urging federal appropriators to fund the program in FY 2016 at the agreed upon \$75 million, as opposed to the President's budget request of \$61 million. Second, Schumer is urging the incoming Assistant Secretary, should she be confirmed, to work to increase funding for this critical project in the President's budget for FY 2017 and beyond.

West Valley spends approximately \$20 million each year on utilities, worker salaries, and other expenses so that decontamination work may continue. This money must be spent regardless, and therefore, the longer the project is underfunded, the more money the project will require in the long run. DOE's inability to adequately fund the West Valley cleanup site has put the effort significantly behind schedule and continued delays as a result of low funding only increase the public health risk posed by the contaminated material that remains at the site. Schumer emphasized in his meeting with Regalbuto that DOE should prioritize full clean-up in the most timely and economically efficient way possible. Schumer also urged Regalbuto to take into account the potential impacts of environmental factors, such as erosion, which could have increasingly negative effects if the project takes longer than originally projected. It is only through full and swift clean-up that the damage to public health, the watershed, and the surrounding community can be mitigated.

The Department of Energy's 2008 Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) established a budget and timeline for decontaminating and removing the toxic waste from the site. The EIS stated that in order to decontaminate and remove the low-level waste from the site over the course of 10 years, it would cost approximately \$75 million per year. West Valley is the site of the first and, to date, only commercial reprocessing plant in the United States. After beginning operations in 1966 with a theoretical capacity to reprocess 300 metric tons of spent nuclear fuel per year, the facility processed a total of 640 tons of nuclear waste in six years before shutting down in 1972. The West Valley Demonstration Project Act, signed into law on October 1, 1980, required the Department of Energy to solidify and dispose of the high-level waste, and decommission the facilities used in the process.

West Valley Reprocessing Plant was formerly an operational plant for the reprocessing of used nuclear fuel at West Valley, New York. It was operated from 1966-72. During this time period, 600,000 gallons of highly radioactive waste accumulated in an underground waste tank. Today, millions of gallons of radioactive waste remain at the site. The plant was shut down in 1972 after regulations at the time required plant modifications. These new regulations were deemed by plant operators to be economically unfeasible.

###



Sen. wants funds to clean up radioactive waste

1:15 PM, Mar 27, 2015

Click on link to view the video.

<http://www.wkbw.com/news/sen-wants-funds-to-clean-up-radioactive-waste#Sen.%20wants%20funds%20to%20clean%20up%20radioactive%20waste>



Senator Schumer is asking Washington to come up with the full \$750 million needed to complete the remaining 10-year radioactive cleanup in the West Valley Demonstration Project in Cattaraugus County.

WEST VALLEY, N.Y. (WKBW) - Senator Charles Schumer says the cleanup at a former nuclear test site in West Valley has been shortchanged for years and wants more federal money to move the project along.

Schumer is asking Washington to come up with the full \$750 million needed to complete the remaining 10-year radioactive cleanup in the West Valley Demonstration Project in Cattaraugus County.

"I met with the new nominee for the Assistant Secretary for Energy, which has jurisdiction over West Valley, and I told her I would support her nomination but only if she pushed for an increase in the cleanup funds for West Valley. Those have decreased over the last few years. That means fewer jobs in West Valley and that means the cleanup will go much slower," Schumer said.

The West Valley plant hasn't operated for more than 40 years but there are still millions of gallons of radioactive waste on site.

OLEAN TIMES HERALD

Schumer urges DOE nominee on West Valley funding

Posted: Saturday, March 28, 2015 11:00 am

By RICK MILLER, Olean Times Herald

WEST VALLEY — U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., earlier this week pressed the new Department of Energy official overseeing the West Valley Demonstration Project cleanup to push for full funding.

Charging that the cleanup program has been shortchanged for years, Schumer on Wednesday met with Monica Regalbuto, nominated to head the Department of Energy's Office of Environmental Management, to ask for restoration of funds needed for the cleanup.

The West Valley cleanup has been ongoing since 1980. In the first phase of the project, more than 600,000 gallons of highly radioactive liquid waste from the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel rods by Nuclear Fuels Services Inc., which closed the plant in 1976, were solidified.

The next phase of the cleanup is the removal of 275 canisters of radioactive glass. Those canisters will be loaded into concrete casks for storage at the West Valley site until they can be removed to a national high-level waste repository.

Currently, the contractor hired to oversee the cleanup, CH2M Hill, is working toward demolition of the Main Process Building so radioactive soil beneath it can be removed. The next phase of the cleanup will also address an underground plume of Strontium 90 that leaked from beneath the plant. Phase I studies are expected to determine whether underground tanks that held the liquid radioactive wastes will be removed in Phase II. Some DOE officials are urging the tanks be filled with grout and left in place.

The Department of Energy had agreed on a funding level of \$75 million a year over 10 years beginning in 2008, but has fallen short over the past several years.

Schumer, in his meeting with Regalbuto, urged her to support the \$75-million-a-year level recommended in the Final Waste Management Environmental Impact Statement of 2008.

In the 2016 federal budget, the Obama administration has asked for \$61 million despite the DOE's recommendation that funding remain at the \$75 million level.

Schumer vowed to fight in the Senate for the \$75 million allocation in 2016 and demanded the federal government not balk at its responsibility.

The West Valley Demonstration Project needs an allocation of at least \$75 million per year for at least 10 years to complete the first phase of cleanup at the out-of-use nuclear reprocessing site, Schumer explained.

The project has been "continually underfunded over the past several years," he added.

In 2008, the DOE issued an Environmental Impact Statement that said that \$75 million per year in federal funding would be needed to begin cleaning at a more economically efficient pace.

OLEAN TIMES HERALD

"Each year since the Environmental Impact Statement was issued, the president has underfunded it in his budget requests — despite the fact that it is still an environmental risk to the residents of Western New York," Schumer said.

Despite the DOE's suggestion of \$75 million per year, in 2015, the West Valley site only received \$60 million for cleanup efforts; in 2014, it received \$66 million; in 2013, it received \$61 million; in 2012, it received \$66 million; and in 2011, it received \$59 million.

"Next year, in (fiscal year) 2016, the funding could drop to the \$61 million that was proposed in the president's budget unless Congress increases funding," Schumer said.

"I met with the president's nominee for the Office of Environmental Management and let her know in clear terms that we have not received a sufficient amount for West Valley cleanup and that we must fund the cleanup effort at \$75 million this year — and in the years ahead," Schumer said. "Each year that the West Valley Demonstration Project goes underfunded, the amount of time and money it will take to decontaminate and remove the waste at the site increases."

(Contact reporter Rick Miller at rmiller@oleantimesherald.com. Follow him on Twitter, @RMillerOTH)

DOE ISSUES RFP FOR WEST VALLEY DEMONSTRATION PROJECT PROBABILISTIC PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT

APRIL 5, 2015

Cincinnati – The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) today issued a Final Request for Proposal (RFP) for the West Valley Demonstration Project Probabilistic Performance Assessment (WVDP-PPA) procurement that will provide support to the DOE, West Valley Demonstration Project, and the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority in performing a probabilistic analysis to support the Phase 2 Decision making Alternative for the West Valley Demonstration Project and Western New York Nuclear Service Center. The WVDP-PPA contract is a Time-and-Material contract. The estimated dollar value for this procurement is under \$5M and is 100% set-aside for small business competition and has a base period of performance of three years and one two-year option if exercised.

Additional information on the RFP is available at:

https://www.emcbc.doe.gov/SEB/WVDP_PPASS. DOE has requested that all proposals be submitted to the designated procurement address no later than May 4, 2015.

THE BUFFALO NEWS

CITY & REGION

Activists en route to United Nations conference arrive Friday in WNY

on April 8, 2015 - 9:58 AM

The 2015 NPT Peace Walk for a Nuclear-Free Future will arrive this weekend for a six-day visit to Western New York – including a stop at West Valley Nuclear Services – before heading to New York City for the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference at the United Nations.

Walkers, who set out March 20 from California, seek to build public awareness of the nuclear threat and costs. Thirty-five people will arrive Friday afternoon in Buffalo, where a rally will be held at 8 a.m. Saturday in Niagara Square before they set off for a 15-mile walk to Hamburg. The public is invited to join the walk.

The group, which includes residents of Japan, will walk to southern Erie County on Sunday, then West Valley on Monday. Other destinations include the Cattaraugus Indian Reservation and Sunset Bay on Lake Erie before the journey heads east Thursday.

Objectives of the international treaty, which took effect in 1970, are to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology, promote cooperation in the peaceful uses of nuclear energy, and further the goal of achieving nuclear disarmament and general and complete disarmament.

The review conference, held every five years since 1970, runs from April 27 to May 22.

OLEAN TIMES HERALD

Energy project presented to Olean Planning Board

By CHRISTOPHER MICHEL, Olean Times Herald | Posted: Tuesday, April 28, 2015 10:30 am

OLEAN — The Olean Planning Board heard on Monday evening the first formal presentation on the biggest proposed renewable energy project in Olean.

BQ Energy, a Poughkeepsie, N.J.-based firm, plans a \$15 million solar power-generating facility on a 33-acre section of the Olean Gateway property off Buffalo Street. The Olean Gateway complex is where Krog Corp., an Orchard Park-based developer, will begin construction of a \$17 million hotel and retail complex in the coming weeks. The site, a former industrial lot, is within the city's brownfields opportunity area.

The power facility is being broken up into three parcels, where 23,900 solar panels will be installed to make 1,330 arrays. Combined, the arrays are expected to generate 7.75 megawatts of power.

"That's enough to power 1,108 homes for one year, or it's like removing 385 cars from the road with the reduction in emissions," said Kim Mason, an attorney from the Phillips Lytle law firm who is working with BQ Energy.

The power-generating facility is expected to have a long lifespan, added Jim Falsetti, BQ Energy's president.

"The panels have a design life of 25 years," he said. "However, the first panels ever made are between 40 and 50 years old and are still in operation."

ASIDE FROM INSTALLING the solar arrays, BQ Energy will also put in equipment to convert electricity generated by the panels from direct current to alternating current so that it can be put into the power grid. Its power generating will be monitored remotely.

St. Bonaventure University will be the primary recipient of energy from the facility and will receive around \$100,000 in annual power credits from National Grid. BQ Energy and city officials are also in talks about expanding the project so that Olean could receive a power allocation like the university.

The entire site will have a fence around it to prevent unauthorized access.

"There is already a fence around the site as it is," Falsetti said. "But it's not new enough or big enough, so we've already designed one that we'll be putting in."

He added that the facility will not have any lights to illuminate it at night.

Solean is one of 141 solar power projects across New York that's receiving tax incentives to develop through the NY Sun program, a \$1 billion initiative to spur solar power developments across the state.

Through NY Sun, the [New York State Energy Research and Development Authority](#) evaluates companies' bids on solar projects based on their potential effectiveness and value.

Estimated incentives offered for the Solean project are around 30 percent of its cost.

Though most of the Olean Planning Board members had not gone over BQ's project proposal in its entirety before the meeting, they did agree to set a public hearing on the project for May 11. After the hearing, they intend on conducting a State Environmental Quality Review to determine if the project will negatively impact the environment and neighboring properties.

The Olean Gateway and Solean site does not abut any residential areas. Dresser-Rand's Olean facility is to the immediate east of the property and Interstate 86 runs along its northern line. A Verizon utility service building is located at the site's northwest corner.

If the project receives all the approval it needs, BQ Energy plans to start construction this summer and have the array up and running by the fall. Board members will likely cast their final votes for the project at their June 8 meeting.

"Moving forward from here, we'll try to be as expeditious as possible," said Tom Barnes, the board's chair. "We'll try not to put any bumps in the road with this process."

**West Valley
Demonstration Project
Quarterly Public Meeting**

**Wednesday, May 27, 2015
6:30 - 8:00pm**

**Ashford Office Complex
9030 Route 219, West Valley, NY 14171**

The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA) will hold a public meeting to provide an update on the WVDP project activities and to discuss progress on the Phase 1 Studies. NYSERDA and DOE will provide the public with an opportunity to ask questions and provide comments.

For further information, please contact
**Lynette Bennett at
Lynette.Bennett@chbwv.com
or (509) 531.5974.**

Reed Protects Community Safety and Property Rights; Ensures Increased Funding to Keep West Valley Demonstration Project on Schedule

May 4, 2015

by **RealEstateRama**

New York, NY – May 5, 2015 – (RealEstateRama) — Congressman Tom Reed today voted in favor of protecting private property rights by supporting 2016 Energy and Water Development Related Agencies Appropriations Act. The bill passed the House with language preventing the Obama Administration from a power grab of private property relative to waterway regulation. “This bill is a victory for Americans from coast to coast and demonstrates that the House cares about protecting private property rights,” Reed said. “I will continue to work as Chair of the Private Property Rights Caucus to ensure that the rights of property owners are defended.”

The bill included funding for energy and water infrastructure investments, including an increase in funding to keep nuclear clean-up on schedule at the **West Valley Demonstration Project** in Cattaraugus County. “We continue making the push in Washington to care for public safety for our communities protect them from environmental hazards that will end up costing taxpayers more money the longer the cleanup process is dragged out,” Reed said. “West Valley deserves a fair level of support that gives taxpayers a tangible return on their investment and I am pleased that we got this included in the bill.”

Reed also noted that the bill includes investments in energy research consistent with his “all of the above” approach to energy. “We must reduce our dependence on Middle East crude,” he declared. “An all of the above approach toward developing and utilizing North American energy sources means lower utility costs for families and helps create manufacturing jobs in places like the Southern Tier and Finger Lakes. We can again become a manufacturing leader and make things here.”

West Valley Demonstration Project donates to three organizations

Representatives from the U.S. Department of Energy, the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority and CH2M HILL BWXT West Valley, LLC presented checks to Bertrand Chaffee Hospital, Mercy Flight and the West Valley Fire District 1, on behalf of the West Valley Demonstration Project.

All three organizations provide valuable resources to the WVDP employees and their surrounding community, Dan Coyne, CHBWV president and general manager said.

"We are fortunate to have these services available within our community should the need arise," Coyne said.

The Bertrand Chaffee Hospital and its staff provide medical support, Mercy Flight provides air ambulance service and the West Valley Fire District volunteers provide fire and emergency services.

In 1997, Mercy Flight signed an agreement to provide air ambulance service to the Project site, stated

Bryan Bower, WVDP director for the U.S. Department of Energy.

"While the need has not arisen, the air ambulance service has taken part in joint emergency planning and exercise to ensure readiness and the employees of

WVDP appreciate their continued commitment," Bower said.

"The fire and emergency services provided by West Valley Fire District 1 are essential for the safety and security of the West Valley Demonstration Project,"

said Paul Bembia, NYSERDA program director. "We appreciate the time and dedication of the first responders and medical staff who ensure that WVDP, and the surrounding community, receive outstanding care and services in the event of emergency situations."



SUBMITTED

From left: Christopher Eckert, DOE-West Valley; Paul Bembia, NYSERDA; Samantha Ryan, development manager of Mercy Flight; Bryan Bower, DOE-West Valley; Dan Coyne, president CH2M HILL West Valley, LLC and Vito Czyz, CH2M HILL West Valley, LLC.



SUBMITTED

From left: Paul Bembia, NYSERDA; Christopher Eckert, DOE-West Valley; Bryan Bower, DOE-West Valley; Eric Boberg, West Valley Fire commissioner; Dan Coyne, president CH2M HILL West Valley, LLC and Vito Czyz, CH2M HILL West Valley, LLC.



From left: Bertrand Chaffee Hospital Foundation Treasurer David Batter-
son; Christopher Eckert, DOE-West Valley; BCH Foundation Board Mem-
ber Jessica Sullivan; BCH CEO Nils GunnerSEN; BCH and BCH Foundation
Board Member Stanley Handzlik; Dan Coyne, President CH2M HILL West
Valley, LLC; Bryan Bower, DOE-West Valley; Paul Bembia, NYSERDA and
Vito Czyz, CH2M HILL West Valley, LLC.

Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper protests plan to bury N-waste near Lake Huron

By **T.J. Pignataro** | News Staff Reporter

on May 29, 2015 - 8:05 PM

A Canadian power generator's plan to bury nuclear waste deep along Lake Huron's shores is a threat not just to Canadians, but to 40 million Great Lakes-area residents on both sides of the border, according to Buffalo-area environmental organizations.

That's why Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper this week joined several groups in sending pleas to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Canadian federal officials opposing Ontario Power Generation's proposal to create a "deep geological repository" for nuclear waste in Kincardine, Ont.

"Our countries and communities are inherently connected by the world's largest fresh water system, and decisions like the one pending in Kincardine have potential ramifications far beyond the boundaries of one community or one generation," said Jill Jedlicka, executive director of the Buffalo Niagara Riverkeeper.

A Canadian review panel earlier this month approved the proposal that calls for storing more than 260,000 cubic yards of "low- and intermediate-level radioactive waste" more than 2,000 feet below the province's Bruce nuclear plant along Lake Huron, according to a recent report by the *Globe and Mail* newspaper. The panel determined the plan was not a threat to the environment or the residents of the region, the report stated.

But Great Lakes environmentalists disagree.

"Storing radioactive waste less than a mile from the Great Lakes is nothing short of reckless," said Brian Smith, associate executive director of Citizens Campaign for the Environment. "Radioactive waste unnecessarily puts the drinking water for 40 million people and the key to our regional economy at risk. After investing billions of dollars in restoring the health of our Great Lakes, we cannot afford to take one step forward and two steps back."

"The Great Lakes basin contains over 90 percent of the U.S. and Canada's fresh water supply, and is the envy of drought-stricken areas across the world. But while California may be fighting drought, we are now fighting stupidity."

Added Jedlicka: "Western New York understands firsthand the unintended consequences and threats to our Great Lakes from nuclear waste storage. ... The nuclear legacy that our region carries at West Valley,

Tonawanda and Niagara Falls is an unfortunate reality for our own community and should be viewed as justification for why the Great Lakes basin is not suitable for siting radioactive waste storage facilities."

The Globe and Mail reported that the site would not contain spent nuclear fuel, but rather radiologically contaminated "clothing and used parts." The volume of radioactive waste would roughly occupy the size of 80 Olympic-sized swimming pools.

Environmental groups are concerned that if the storage area fails and the waste gets into the Great Lakes system, it would compromise the drinking water supplies to millions, not to mention result in environmental devastation that would last for thousands of years.

Members of the Great Lakes Waterkeepers and the Waterkeeper Alliance petitioned Kerry and Canadian authorities late last year to block the planned storage of nuclear waste at Kincardine and support resolutions in both houses of the U.S. Congress that would oppose underground storage of nuclear waste in the Great Lakes basin.

Canadian federal officials must now approve the plan before a license to construct the underground disposal area could be issued by the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission, the Globe and Mail reported.

email: tpignataro@buffnews.com

WHOWHATWHY EXCLUSIVE: OUR HOMELESS, EXPLOSIVE RADIOACTIVE WASTE



Barrels of nuclear waste at this isolation plant could be a ticking time bomb. Photo credit: [Department of Energy](#)

A 2014 explosion at a remote facility in New Mexico has exposed a cover-up of the mounting problems encountered in modernizing the United States nuclear weapons arsenal. What US officials have called “stockpile stewardship”—the maintenance of an aging supply of nuclear weapons without detonation—has failed its first major test: disposal of the waste from three-quarters of a century of weapons development.

The cause of the 2014 explosion? The inadvertent use of the wrong kind of kitty litter, the supposedly inert material prescribed for packing around the waste in steel storage barrels. While the Department of Energy (DOE) originally reported that the damage was only to one barrel, New Mexico state officials now say that the damage may involve as many as 500 barrels of radioactive waste.

The waste came from Los Alamos National Laboratory, the flagship of the US nuclear weapons complex, where instructions to pack the waste with “inorganic” material was reportedly misread as “in organic” material.

This error, which would be laughably absurd if the consequences weren’t so serious, neatly illustrates the high-tech/low-tech mashup that has made the storage of nuclear waste such a contentious issue over the past seven decades.

Government regulations currently recognize at least three categories of the nuclear waste stored at various locations across the country: high-level, low-level, and mill tailings. Anti-nuclear activists believe that dividing the waste into multiple categories is actually a bureaucratic tactic designed to fool the public into believing that the government is taking care of this massive and potentially deadly problem.

The waste at WIPP—a byproduct of the US nuclear weapons complex dating back to 1942—is considered “transuranic” (TRU). This term refers to contamination by elements beyond uranium in the periodic table, including the plutonium used in nuclear bombs. This kind of waste is unstable and remains dangerously radioactive for a very long time.

For safety’s sake, TRU waste should be buried without possibility of human contact for more than a quarter million years. The US government has spent tens of billions to achieve that goal of virtually “permanent” storage. First proposed in the 1970s, the WIPP facility was completed in the 1990s and has been operational for about a dozen years.

But WIPP’s complex containment system was breached in last year’s fire and explosion, which spread plutonium for miles around the plant. Exactly what happened 2,000 feet underground to

WHOWHATWHY EXCLUSIVE: OUR HOMELESS, EXPLOSIVE RADIOACTIVE WASTE

trigger this disaster is not known, because the DOE has not been forthcoming about the details. But the bits and pieces of the story unearthed so far are deeply disturbing.

Goodbye Kitty

WIPP's radioactive waste is "in danger of explosion," says Secretary Ryan Flynn of the New Mexico Environmental Department. Flynn warns that **the facility** poses an "imminent" and "substantial" threat to public health and the environment. In addition to**the 369 at-risk barrels the state has identified at WIPP**, at least another 100 barrels at a site in Texas are a source of concern. The exact location of these barrels has not been made clear.

The time bomb at WIPP began ticking when a truck fire followed by an unrelated explosion a few days later caused massive damage, **according to the DOE report**. Waste barrels were packed with commercially available "Swheat" brand organic kitty litter, rather than industry-standard "inorganic kitty litter." The contents of the waste barrel reacted with the kitty litter and exploded in what US Secretary of Energy Ernest Moniz called a "thermal event," which is government-speak for an explosion that generated an unusual amount of heat. The destruction seen on remote cameras sent to the site of the explosion shows flame-scorched drums oozing their deadly contents.

That crisis unfolded when workers heard what was described as a "green burst" and "popping noises" at the facility. A warning siren, the eerie harbinger of a nuclear accident, signaled a radiation release and emergency ventilation fans were switched on to exhaust the contaminated air through special filters—which failed. Thirteen workers underground at the time of the explosion tested positive for "internal radioactive contamination" from radioactive elements released by the explosion; another 21 workers on the surface were also exposed to radiation. Any unplanned exposure to radiation whatsoever is termed "dangerous" under US environmental law.

Because of the accident, it's possible that WIPP will not be reopened for years and therefore won't be able to receive waste from sites across the US.

This has turned a spotlight on the other sites in the US capable of storing nuclear waste.

One is the upstate New York hamlet of **West Valley**, due south of Buffalo, which houses Cold War-era nuclear waste mixed with waste generated by nuclear power plants. Like WIPP, the West Valley facility has a history of failed containment.

A Wee Bit of History

Back in the 1940s, the top-secret Manhattan Project, the massive industrial operation that built America's early nuclear arsenal during World War II, left a poisoned legacy beneath New York state's greenery. That legacy now threatens the vast Great Lakes watershed and the region's superb agricultural assets.

The 3,300-acre disposal site was the brainchild of former governor Nelson Rockefeller, who planned to make New York State a leader in what was to be the emerging industry of nuclear waste reprocessing.

During the war, weapons-grade uranium for the A-bomb was recovered from raw uranium ore at the still-operating uranium refinery located in the lakeside community of Port Hope, Ontario. The

WHOWHATWHY EXCLUSIVE: OUR HOMELESS, EXPLOSIVE RADIOACTIVE WASTE

partially processed bomb fuel was shipped to top secret factories near Buffalo for further processing, before being sent on to processing facilities across the United States.

In those days, environmental protections were virtually unheard of. Wartime expediency dictated that waste from the project was often directly dumped into rivers, lakes and streams as well as into the air and into landfills.

The Manhattan Project was followed by more than four decades of Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union. According to former DOE advisor Robert Alvarez, expansion of the American nuclear arsenal during this period left some two million cubic meters of deadly radioactive waste

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) claims the waste volume is only half Alvarez's estimate. That would still be enough to fill somewhere between one and two Empire State Buildings, depending on how waste is **defined**. By anyone's estimate, the immense quantities of clothing, machinery, and other gear contaminated by plutonium and other cancer-causing radionuclides add up to a multi-billion-dollar disposal headache.

Go West, West Valley Waste

The radioactive waste currently held at **West Valley**'s waste facility was earmarked for WIPP. Now, activists and New Mexico officials say it may have to wait years longer for removal. According to Diane D'Arrigo of the Nuclear Information and Resource Service, an anti-nuclear group, if New Mexico's WIPP stays offline, that means no West Valley waste goes west.

This poses serious environmental problems that earlier generations never foresaw. "The reality of West Valley is that it's leaking into the Great Lakes," D'Arrigo told *WhoWhatWhy*.

Government spokespeople have long maintained West Valley's waste would never find its way from the site into the Great Lakes. Yet D'Arrigo told *WhoWhatWhy*, "Radioactivity is migrating into the [nearby] creeks and rivers, and plutonium has been found in Lake Ontario," leading to mounting "concern that the waste can't stay there."



Handlers gather samples of waste for analysis. Photo credit: Department of Energy

WHOWHATWHY EXCLUSIVE: OUR HOMELESS, EXPLOSIVE RADIOACTIVE WASTE

Upshot? Radioactive Musical Chairs

Joanne Hameister of the Coalition on West Valley Nuclear Waste, an advocacy group of local activists and national anti-nuclear organizations, says of the local waste, “We do not suggest moving it until there is a verifiably safe repository.” Don Hancock in New Mexico says that WIPP cannot take on that role. Former New Mexico Senator Jeff Bingaman supports a [2004 letter](#) to the DOE which asserted that weapons waste from the N-Reactor stored at West Valley was mixed with commercial non-defense waste and therefore the senator wrote: “I ask that you do not dispose the West Valley’s non-defense (waste) at WIPP...”

Radioactive contaminants in “small amounts” have already reached the Great Lakes, according to a negotiator facilitating talks between the state and federal government over West Valley’s future, who spoke with *WhoWhatWhy* on promise of anonymity. The danger of contamination was reported [in an article in The Buffalo News](#), which called West Valley “arguably Western New York’s most toxic location.”

The wetlands of West Valley have leached a plume containing the radioactive isotope strontium-90 that’s migrating downstream, according to government sponsored studies. DOE has also identified plutonium, strontium and cesium, all dangerous radioactive contaminants, throughout the soil structure at West Valley.

Between five and 50 kilograms of plutonium-239, a deadly carcinogen and potential bomb fuel, has infiltrated the soil underneath the site, says another knowledgeable source who requested anonymity. “Recordkeeping [in earlier decades] was not as precise as today and it’s difficult to reconstruct,” the source says. So no one knows for sure just how much uranium and/or plutonium has seeped from West Valley over the past 60 years. And with the explosion at WIPP, it could be another 60 years before a proper storage location for the waste from this notoriously leaky site is found.

Whether or not one believes the Manhattan Project’s lethal weapons should ever have been used, the old Roman dictum—“to the victors, the spoils”—was never more true. The spoils—the legacy of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—live on, intermingled with the radioactive offspring of “cheap power” in the wilds of West Valley.

“A secure nuclear deterrent,” said [DOE Secretary Moniz](#) at the dedication of a new nuclear weapons facility in Kansas City, “is part of a broader effort to transform our Cold War era infrastructure into a 21st century nuclear security enterprise.”

That transformation depends on solving 75 years of mismanagement by sweeping the waste 2,000 feet under the New Mexico desert. But recent events at WIPP cast further doubt on the notion that fallible human agencies can ever safeguard the inevitable byproducts of our nuclear enterprise.

Panorama Credits:

[Department of Energy; US Department of Energy](#) [WIPP Waste Isolation Pilot Plant Recovery; Department of Energy](#)