

Another Voice: West Valley cleanup is proceeding too slowly

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By William H. Townsend

In 1959 I was taking my intro engineering geology course at the University of Michigan geology camp in the Tetons when they were selecting a site near Buffalo for a nuclear reprocessing project. Every Sunday my roommate Red Berenson (of hockey fame) and I hiked in the glacier-scoured Tetons.

I could have told you then that geological instability at the West Valley site made it unsuitable for long-term disposal of nuclear materials.

In 1963, when the plant for reprocessing spent nuclear fuel was under construction, I finished my master's degree and started a Cold War job, designing Minuteman missile equipment to withstand a first strike from nuclear bombs. By 1972, when I finished my Ph.D., they were closing down the failed West Valley project.

Half a century later, we are beginning the process of deciding what to do with the mess of nuclear waste in the ground at West Valley. The Department of Energy is responsible for most of this cleanup at West Valley, as it is around the country.

It does this at a turtle's pace, hampered by inadequate budgets. Delays in remediation drastically increase costs, as rusting tanks and barrels leak into the soil.

The General Accounting Office in February 2017 named the U.S. government's environmental liabilities as one of the government's highest-risk areas. Most of this risk falls within the Department of Energy.

Some of the radioactive sites, such as Hanford in Washington state, are massive projects dating back to the World War II Manhattan Project; others are relatively small, such as West Valley.

The West Valley Demonstration Project has already proved its value as a pilot project for the vitrification of high-level nuclear waste, a process now used on a large scale at Hanford. Our water is under threat from radioactive runoff moving toward streams that flow into Cattaraugus Creek, then Lake Erie, the source of our drinking water. The potential is there for large storms to cause a landslide, releasing nuclear waste that could contaminate our water. Perhaps West Valley might serve as a pilot project to research techniques for decontaminating soil and water.

Nuclear waste cleanup is in fact a job-creating infrastructure project, but it should not require special funding. All it requires is shifting a substantial chunk of the money in the proposed federal budget designated for "modernizing" the U.S. weapons arsenal to the best kind of modernization – a prompt, full cleanup of abandoned DOE facilities.

This would protect the health of citizens, workers, the natural environment and Great Lakes water. Not as glamorous as more bombs under the control of that big "nuclear button" on the president's desk, but much more practical for keeping us all safe.

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