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West Valley Demonstration Project progress shared with county legislators



Jason Casper, the new president and general manager of **CH2M HILL BWXT West Valley**, shares progress being made at the **West Valley Demonstration Project** with the Cattaraugus County Legislature Wednesday. Kellen M. Quigley/Olean Times Herald.

LITTLE VALLEY — With about \$160 million spent so far in building demolition, the **West Valley Demonstration Project** has come a long way in cleaning up the former nuclear fuel reprocessing plant in northern Cattaraugus County — and that progress continues this summer.

That's the message shared with county legislators Wednesday by Jason Casper, the new president and general manager of **CH2M HILL BWXT West Valley**, the Department of Energy's clean-up contractor for the site.

Casper showed county officials photos of the site's progress on the Main Plant deconstruction, which began in September 2022. He said one of the more complicated aspects of the demolition was the removal of nine liquid waste cell tanks that held contaminated materials — the biggest portion of contamination content still left in the facility.

"All of those tanks have been removed, the biggest one being the 7D-2," he said. Removing the 20-ton tank was "a significant lift. A big evolution for our workforce to be able to pick it as well as protection from a radiological standpoint."

All of the removed tanks were individually packaged in specially manufactured waste containers, Casper said.

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The project's success depends on doing work safely, Casper said, reporting that the WVDP safety record is excellent, especially for a site of its size. He said their last recordable injury incident was in June 2023.

"Our numbers, compared to the industry, are heading toward zero right now, which are exceptional numbers across the industry, especially considering the hazardous work that we do," he said. "It speaks to the workforce that we have and the great things that they're doing there."

BEYOND THE liquid cell removals, Casper said demolition of portions of the building that were higher off the ground had the potential to reveal some of the greatest potential for unknown issues.

"We were very careful on the approach," he said. The crews spray water to help keep the dust down and potential contamination down when demolition is in progress. "We use this all the time."

On the other side of the building, Casper said removal of the east wall introduced potential safety concerns for their high-reach equipment to pull portions of the building down even though it was a low-risk area. In another area, crews expected to see piping throughout the building that could be pulled out in a single component, but the removal didn't quite go as planned.

"One of the reasons I personally love decommissioning and demolition is it's always unique," he said. "Everybody puts together a great plan to build the building, but once you go back and pull the building apart, you frequently find it is not exactly what they designed."

In addition to the work they do at the site, Casper said WVDP is proud to give back to the community and be part of it. In 2023, they donated \$5,000 to both Bertrand Chaffee Hospital and Mercy Flight, \$80,000 to the **West Valley** Fire District 1 and \$380,000 to the sheriff's department. They also raised over \$13,000 for the United Way and collected over 350 toys for Toys for Tots.

"We really feel that this is part of our responsibility to be engaged in the community," he said.

However, the program everyone at the site gets most excited about is the annual food drive that delivers food to nine pantries across Cattaraugus County and southern Erie County. This past year, they raised enough funds and collected enough food for 10,800 meals.

"It's one of those I find very inspiring, just to be around the people who are delivering the food and have the opportunity to be there," Casper said.

TAKING QUESTIONS from the legislature, Casper said there are several waste sites across the southwestern United States, including Texas and Nevada. He said the material is specially packaged and shipped west by rail.

Casper said their current contract with the Department of Energy for the Main Plant runs until 2025, but there is more work to be done at the site.

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“The next set of scope is to excavate the low-grade, going down to about 30 feet,” he said. “It’s the whole footprint as well as a lot of the contaminated soil around the buildings. That’s anticipated to take about another 10 years, and then there’s another phase that is called Phase 2, which is anticipated to be in the general vicinity of 10 years.”

Casper also noted the total budget for the Phase 1-B project, which is subject to change, is about \$3 billion. The current demo portion of the project has a budget just shy of \$1 million, mostly going toward labor and shipping costs.

“Typically in industry any place else, where we have a lot of space and a clean building, this is probably a month’s worth of work,” he said. “Because there is contamination associated with it, we have very specific controls and very specific requirements ... Sometimes we only get an hour’s worth of work before we shut down for the day because that’s as much as we’ve allowed from an (Air Dispersion Modeling) standpoint. It’s very controlled in how we approach the demolition.”

Kellen M. Quigley