

Congressional delegation asks Gates to fix depot dilemma

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Eastern Oregon's congressional delegation has responded to a call to arms from the Umatilla Chemical Depot Local Reuse Authority.

In a sharply worded letter Thursday to Defense Secretary Robert Gates, Rep. Greg Walden and Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley challenged the Department of Defense's 11th-hour attempt to keep the Umatilla Chemical Depot under federal ownership.

Their letter called the decision by the DOD's Office of General Counsel "wasteful ... counterproductive." They urged Gates to overrule the attorneys' opinion and to close the depot under Base Realignment and Closure Commission authority, as the law requires.

Umatilla County Commissioner Bill Hansell, who also is the LRA chairman, said he appreciated the delegation's support.

"The letter is excellent and raises some important questions," Hansell said. "The LRA sincerely appreciates the attention and help offered by our delegation."

Carla McLane, who represents Morrow County on the LRA, also was pleased about the elected representatives' efforts.

"The support of Eastern Oregon's congressional delegation in helping to maintain the closure of the Umatilla Army Depot under BRAC is much appreciated," she said. "Clearly, their staff did their homework, researching the background to the BRAC 2005 law."

Kim Puzey, who represents the Port of Umatilla on the LRA, praised the delegation for working together.

"One of the most important things that was demonstrated from this letter was to see how our elected officials from both chambers and both sides of the political aisle can come together in a unified voice for the good of the people they represent," he said. "It was very gratifying to see the signatures of Sen. Ron Wyden and Sen. Jeff Merkley alongside the signature of Congressman Greg Walden."

The federal government has spent more than \$1 million to finance 20 years of local planning on what to do with the 20,000-acre depot west of Hermiston. But DOD attorneys decided recently the depot should not be closed under the BRAC authority once workers finish destroying the chemicals stored there. That work is expected to be completed this year.

The elected representatives said DOD attorneys instead recommend closing the depot under looser authority that would deprive the local community of any say in the future of the land and assistance in recovering lost jobs.

“This decision is not only wasteful and counterproductive, but is also counter to the letter and spirit of the BRAC statute,” the Oregon members of Congress wrote.

The letter states Congress created BRAC as a way to consolidate and realign military facilities and save taxpayer dollars.

“To try to use the BRAC statute to keep (the Depot) in federal hands and waste more than \$1 million is shameful,” they wrote. “We hope that you will review the OGC’s decision, and, finding that it was based on several false assertions, overrule it and allow the closure of (the Depot) to continue under BRAC.”

In addition, Wyden, Merkley and Walden said they will seek a legislative change to eliminate any doubt of about the authority to continue the closure of the depot under BRAC.

Under BRAC, the federal government provides aid to local communities affected by military base closures. None of that assistance would be available if the facility is closed outside of BRAC authority.

Under the local plan, portions of the property would go to the Oregon National Guard for training uses, to the U.S. Fish and Wild Service as a wildlife refuge and to the ports of Umatilla and Morrow for economic development purposes.