

Congressional words may aid local depot plan

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There is no calculating the financial benefit of the Umatilla Chemical Depot for Eastern Oregon. It has provided numerous jobs and a steady flow of federal dollars into the economy of our region for decades.

Yet the bottom line is the northeastern Oregon site has been home to some of the military's most dangerous and hazardous weapons since 1962 when the Umatilla Chemical Depot assumed the mission of destroying chemical weapons. Our region accepted the responsibility — and very real dangers as well as environmental hazards — associated with that assignment.

Also, for the past 20 years, the Local Reuse Authority has been planning for the closure of the facility (once the chemical weapon destruction is complete later this year or early next year) under the authority of the Base Realignment and Closure Commission. Under BRAC, the federal government provides aid to local communities — in this case, that's all of us in Umatilla and Morrow counties — affected by military base closures.

So it was unimaginable when, earlier this month, the LRA learned that the Department of Defense's office of general counsel had made a last-minute decision to keep the Umatilla Chemical Depot under federal ownership. That would mean our communities would get nothing. No federal assistance in recovering lost jobs, no say in the future ownership or use of the land.

After the federal government had 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, some obscure lawyers in DOD decided to throw it all away.

LRA Chairman Bill Hansell, a Umatilla County commissioner, was stunned. Everyone on the LRA, including city, port, county and tribal representatives, was equally shocked.

Fortunately, three Oregonians with some considerable clout, are on our side. The three — Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley and Rep. Greg Walden — are not exactly political bosom buddies. Yet the two Democrats and one Republican put aside their political differences to challenge the Department of Defense on the Umatilla Chemical Depot decision.

They took their case straight to the top man at DOD, Secretary Robert M. Gates. In a letter to Gates, our three congressmen didn't mince any words.

“Your Office of General Counsel recently revealed that it has determined that the Umatilla Chemical Depot will be closed outside of the BRAC process. This decision is not only wasteful and counterproductive but is counter to the letter and spirit of the BRAC statute.

“Umatilla, Oregon, has been home to some of the Army's most dangerous weapons since 1962 ... Once it became clear in 1990 that the chemical weapons at UMCD were going to be destroyed, the Governor of Oregon organized a regional task force to begin planning for the eventual closure of the facility. Four years later, a Local Reuse Authority, made of representatives from all the local stakeholders, was formed to create a formal plan for the eventual closure of UMCD.”

The congressmen noted that the LRA has devoted countless hours to plan for the day when one of the region's largest employers shuts its doors. Under the local plan, the depot would be parceled out to the Oregon National Guard, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and to the ports of Umatilla and Morrow for economic development. The LRA plan had been accepted by all regional stakeholders — “not an easy task,” the congressmen pointed out.

Wyden, Merkley and Walden also detailed several legal errors in the DOD decision. “Clearly, (the congressional) staff did their homework, researching the background to the 2005 BRAC law,” said Carla McLane, a Morrow County representative on the LRA.

The congressmen's strongest words were saved for the last paragraphs of the two-page letter:

“As you know, Congress created BRAC as a way to consolidate and realign military facilities — saving taxpayer dollars. To try to use the BRAC statute to keep UMCD in federal hands and waste more than \$1 million is shameful.

“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 UMCD to continue under BRAC.

“In addition, we will be seeking a legislative change to eliminate any doubt of your authority to continue the closure of UMCD under BRAC after September 2011.”

Despite the mind-numbing use of acronyms, we wholeheartedly agree.

Kim Puzey, the Port of Umatilla executive director who also serves on the LRA, cited the cooperation of our congressmen.

“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 aisle can come together in a unified voice for the good of the people they represent,” said Puzey.

That cooperation, an increasing rarity in today’s extreme political polarization, might just be our ace in the hole.

Our region has fulfilled its commitment to the nation with its service through the depot. We deserve to receive the benefits of the LRA plan — a commitment made by the nation through the BRAC process.

In conclusion, Secretary Gates is well-known for making smart decisions. We believe, as our congressmen do, that closing the Umatilla Chemical Depot is the right decision for the government and our region.

Let’s hope we hear from Mr. Gates very soon.