

Depot frustrates county leaders

Morrow County leaders express concern about cleanup after chemicals are destroyed and Army moves out

October 9, 2009 – East Oregonian - Reporter: Erin Mills

The Umatilla Army Depot may have been good for Morrow County in the past, but those days are over, county leaders say.

Frustrations with the Army and the Navy, which runs the bombing range, were the No. 1 topic at a meeting of the Port of Morrow Commission, the Boardman City Council and the Morrow County Court Wednesday evening.

Although they are working with the Local Reuse Authority, or LRA, to decide what will happen on the depot once the chemical operations are complete, the leaders are fearful the Army will neglect to clean the depot before it leaves.

In addition to asbestos-laden, decrepit buildings, the depot includes an 1100-acre no-man's land of unexploded munitions and hazardous debris.

Many of those at the meeting remember a time when the Army exploded munitions every day at 1:20 p.m. Those weapons left chemicals, such as nitrogen, that continue to affect the area. When the Lower Umatilla Basin Groundwater Management Area was established in the mid-'90s, the depot was listed as one of the reasons for high nitrates in the water.

Everyone at the meeting agreed that, in order for the depot to be of value to the county, it needs to be cleaned up first, and the Army should pay for it.

"The challenge is, the Army has no interest in doing much cleanup," said Port of Morrow manager Gary Neal. "They want to transfer this property and walk away."

Neal said the military has abandoned some contaminated bases - simply padlocked the gates and walked away. The Umatilla depot could end up like that, he said.

The Oregon Army National Guard has expressed an interest in creating a training base in the northern section of the depot. The leaders were lukewarm on that idea - the depot has already taken a big chunk of potentially productive land out of commission. The National Guard, like the Army, would not pay taxes on the land.

"It just perpetuates the non-beneficial use for the citizens of Morrow County," Neal said.

Neal suggested a payment in lieu of taxes, which some military bases pay to local governments.

County Judge Terry Tallman echoed Neal's concern, but stressed that it was important to keep the lines of communication open with the Army. And the county governments need to work together as a team, he said.

Tallman drew a parallel between the depot and the bombing range. In both cases, the land is isolated and controlled and county leaders often hit a wall when asking for compromise or change.

The bombing range is an enormous acreage - 47,000 - that could be used for agriculture and industry. The Navy does not pay taxes on the land, and it employs about seven employees on the range, Tallman said, only two of which live in the area.

Tallman said he was struck by the naval base on Whidbey Island in Washington when he visited recently. The base contributes \$525 million to the local economy and has created 10,400 jobs. Tallman said the bombing range could be mutually beneficial for the county and the Navy.

"We got to keep doing it, putting it in front of their face, and I think we need to do it jointly," Tallman said. "With the depot and the bombing range, it's the same issues, different players."

Bruce Henrickson, the Umatilla Chemical Depot's public information officer, said the Army's first priority will be to clean up areas contaminated by chemical munitions. The depot will need federal funding to clean up the ammunition/ demolition area in Morrow County, he said, but he is confident that the cleanup will be part of the closure plan.

"We've always sought funding to do what's necessary to close down the depot," he said. "I don't know the status of that at this time, but it will be one of the things we will be working on as we move toward closure of the depot."