

Contamination at Umatilla clouds land-use issue

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HERMISTON -- With the Army on track to destroy the last of the deadly mustard agents at its Umatilla Chemical Depot in 2011 and return the sprawling property to public use, developers from ports to tribes are drawing up plans.

But contamination and unexploded weapons could delay any transfer, possibly for years.

The 19,728-acre depot 11 miles west of Hermiston has plenty of land for industrial development. It also has 50 miles of interior rail lines, easy access to Interstates 84 and 82, and close proximity to two Columbia River ports and a Union Pacific main line, said Scott Fairly, spokesman for Gov. Ted Kulongoski.

"Where else in the world do you have nearly 20,000 acres that can be developed with interstate access?" asked Brian Cole, who heads a consulting team helping plan the depot's future.

His team is advising a land reuse committee that includes representatives of the ports, Umatilla and Morrow counties, and the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation near Pendleton.

The committee, formed at the Army's behest, is tasked with developing a reuse plan by March.



Storage "igloos" that once contained stockpiles of chemical weapons cover 40 percent of the U.S. Army's Umatilla chemical Depot near Hermiston. What to do with the structures is among issues the Army needs to decide before the site can be turned over for public use.



The depot once held more than 10 percent of the nation's chemical weapons, including these projectiles containing VX, an agent designed to kill on skin contact. The Army is now on schedule to destroy the last stores of chemical agents at the site in 2011.

All the groups want a piece of the action. The ports of Morrow and Umatilla plan to submit "notices of interest" Nov. 23 in hopes of acquiring some of the land, said Gary Neal, manager of the Port of Morrow. The Oregon National Guard, another committee participant, is seeking half the land to train tank crews, he said.

The tribes are interested in economic development and protecting some sage-steppe habitat. Morrow County Commissioner Terry Tallman is eager to bring the depot, 60 percent of which lies in Morrow County, back onto tax rolls. The county also includes a U.S. Navy bombing range that keeps 47,000 acres off the rolls.

But contamination at the Umatilla depot and other issues could bring all the plans to a halt.

The base has served since 1941 as a repository for bombs, rockets, ammunition and 7.4 million pounds of deadly nerve and mustard agents. Its stores once included sarin and VX, both developed by Nazi scientists to kill on skin contact, along with nerve and mustard agents trucked to the depot in 1962.

The chemicals were contained in mortars, rockets, bombs, land mines, artillery projectiles, aircraft "spray tanks" and 1-ton bulk containers. The depot held an estimated 11.5 percent of U.S. chemical weapons stockpiles in partly buried concrete and reinforced-steel "igloos" before the Army began destroying the weapons in 2004.

Now more than 1,100 people work at the depot, most helping incinerate the remaining mustard agents at a "chemical demilitarization" facility, said Bruce Henrickson, a civilian spokesman for the Army.

The last bulk containers are scheduled to be incinerated in summer 2011, he said, then the demilitarization facilities will be dismantled.

Still, unexploded weapons and tons of chemically contaminated soil will remain. Tallman said an Army official told him that one 1,750-acre part of the depot, once used to blow up obsolete weapons, contains some 600,000 items, from unexploded bombs to tin cans buried to a depth of 4 feet.

Henrickson said the Army is required by the federal Base Realignment and Closure process to clean the site before turning it over. But no one has estimated the cost of a cleanup, let alone set aside any money.

If costs are too high, the Army could end up keeping the land and just letting it sit, said Bill Hansell, a Umatilla County commissioner and chairman of the land reuse committee.

Tallman worries about that, too, though Cole says it's more likely the Army will transfer property in stages over several years.

Other complications include:

The depot electrical system is obsolete, and the site contains badly deteriorated buildings, some loaded with asbestos, Tallman and Neal said. Of six 65,000-square-foot buildings on the site's southwest corner, only one may be salvageable, Neal said.

The Army needs to decide what to do with the 1,001 igloos, which cover 40 percent of the site, Cole said, and a World War II-era administrative area with a mess hall, barracks and recreational facilities.

The Army must approve any civilian uses and won't decide on the level of cleanup that is needed until it does. For example, an industrial use would require less cleanup than a residential use. "I just think it's backward," Tallman said. "I think they should clean it up first, and then we'll talk about what we'll use."

Tallman also has misgivings about the rail lines. They've been disconnected from Union Pacific's main line and putting them back into operation would require two connections costing \$1 million each, he said.

Letting the depot sit isn't a great option, either.

In March 1944, a 500-pound bomb accidentally detonated, killing five men and a woman. In 1984, four children entered and stole a small quantity of explosives that later detonated, injuring three of them. Workers have also dealt with numerous chemical leaks in recent years, though no serious injuries were reported.

"Locking it up and putting a fence around it and saying, 'Sorry,' or 'You'll have to use it as it is,' doesn't seem to be the right answer," Neal said.