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WELDON SPRING

Buildings Fall, U.S. Spending Rises On Cleanup

By Lisha Gayle
Of the St. Charles Post

The horizon is about to change at a former uranium-processing plant off Highway 94 at Weldon Spring.

"The buildings are going to start coming down," said Steve McCracken, manager of the project to clean up the plant, which is contaminated by radioactivity.

The changing horizon will be the most visible sign of a significant increase in cleanup activity at the plant this year, said McCracken.

A sign that is less noticeable — but no less significant — is a jump in the amount of money the federal government is spending on the cleanup. Last year, the project got $36 million; this year the amount nearly doubled to $70 million, McCracken said.

The change comes because the project is in transition, he said. In the past, most of the project's effort was spent on planning; now the effort will shift to actual cleanup, he said. The money comes from the U.S. Army and the U.S. Energy Department. The fiscal year began Oct. 1.

Despite the extra activity, McCracken said, "there will be no additional truck traffic on the road."

McCracken said that most cleanup activity will focus on two jobs — demolishing buildings and cleaning out a water-filled quarry that was used as a dump.

On the demolition, workers have removed several structures and they have about 35 structures left, McCracken said. The buildings were part of a plant where the federal government processed uranium for nuclear weapons. The plant operated from the mid-1950s until 1967.

Demolition of the plant will be done with extra care to minimize the amount of radioactive dust in the atmosphere and to protect the workers, McCracken said.

"It's not as though we just bring the building crashing down," McCracken said. "We take it down a piece at a time."

First, workers go in and "decontaminate" each building by removing asbestos and using scrub brushes and vacuum cleaners to remove dust and dirt. Then workers begin to take down the building, a section at a time.

About two years ago, workers demolished a steam plant and an administration building, McCracken said. In the last six months, workers demolished four small warehouses that were made of corregated metal, he said.

On the quarry cleanup, workers will drain the water and remove about 100,000 cubic yards of debris, including concrete, structural steel, drums and a fork lift, McCracken said.

Plans call for polluted water in the quarry to be sent through a water-treatment plant and discharged into the Missouri River. Workers are building a $1.5 million treatment plant and $2.5 million worth of basins to hold contaminated water and to hold treated water for testing, McCracken said.

The water-treatment plant at the quarry will handle about 11 million gallons of water over about six years, McCracken said.

A second water treatment plant, worth about $2.4 million, is being built at a different location — near the former uranium-processing factory. That plant will treat rainwater and water that becomes contaminated as part of the cleanup.