

# Nuclear Waste Cleanup At N.Y. Site Nears Completion

by DANIEL ROBISON

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For six years, workers processed nuclear waste at a plant outside Buffalo. In its short life, the West Valley Demonstration Project polluted soil, air and water, and may have sickened employees. Four decades later, hundreds of cleanup workers are still at the site decontaminating buildings that will eventually be torn down. Now, workers are preparing to install a massive underground wall designed to stop the spread of a radioactive plume that threatens the region's groundwater. As the West Valley cleanup nears completion, reporter Daniel Robison looks at an environmental disaster that led to a new understanding of how to deal with nuclear waste.

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AUDIE CORNISH, host:

For 30 years now, cleanup of nuclear waste has been underway in western New York. The West Valley Reprocessing Plant is blamed for polluted soil, air, water and sick workers and there's no end in sight.

Daniel Robison reports.

DANIEL ROBISON: Chuck Kutcher(ph) has lived in the same house for 42 years on hilly farmland in upstate New York. He ran a greenhouse, two floral shops and raised three kids. In the late 1960s, he wasn't the only one new to the neighborhood. Just opening up down the street, was the West Valley Nuclear Reprocessing Facility. As the first plant to recycle fuel from the nation's nuclear power plants, Kutcher says it brought the community hope, jobs and promises of safety.

Mr. CHUCK KUTCHER: Well, they'd come to my place and test vegetables. They would test dairy cows. They would test the milk. They would kill some deer and test those.

ROBISON: While tests on Kutcher's land came back negative, radiation eventually spread off-site due to accidents, lax storage and poor management. When tighter regulations forced the plant to shut down, word of the problems leaked to a scared public and John Chamberlain(ph) says waste leaked out of untended storage tanks.

Mr. JOHN CHAMBERLAIN: The waste we had in that tank was a concentrated radioactive material with as many different isotopes in it as you could have found anywhere.

ROBISON: Chamberlain's been working on the cleanup for 28 years at West Valley. He says there's no way to get rid of all the radiation, some will take millennia to fully decay. A battalion in Hazmat suits continues to take this place apart one pipe and barrel at a time. Yet, despite the intense cleanup, an underground pipe leaked unnoticed for two decades, sending a plume of radioactive strontium creeping towards creeks that feed Lake Erie.

Now, workers are building a giant water filter underground that's as long as three football fields and as tall as a utility pole. The wall of volcanic rock will purify the contaminated ground water as it passes through.

Ms. SHANNON SENECA: I, myself, have an obsession with radioactive waste.

ROBISON: Shannon Seneca(ph) designed the wall. In fact, it's her thesis at the University at Buffalo.

Ms. SENECA: Strontium really likes to travel with the ground water. Rather than just being one oval-type shape that's moving underground, it actually has, like, fingers pointing in different directions.

ROBISON: Seneca admits the wall isn't perfect. Some strontium-soaked sections will stop working in less than 30 years. But the project has been credited as an innovative way to protect the public. In fact, research into other mishaps at West Valley has resulted in breakthroughs for long-term nuclear storage

The plant has also cost taxpayers billions of dollars and will continue to do so. Ruth Weiner(ph) is with the Sandia National Lab. She says West Valley has always been ahead of its time, but not necessarily had the best timing.

Ms. RUTH WEINER: Nobody really realized in 1966, when West Valley was first started, what all of the associated cleanup problems and, for that matter, cleanup regulations might be.

ROBISON: Weiner believes the nuclear industry has grown into a more responsible adult through West Valley's mistakes. Still, officials don't know how many decades it will take to tear down the plant and some waste is likely to be stored there permanently.

For NPR News, I'm Daniel Robison in Buffalo, New York.

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