

West Valley Exhumation Study with Full-Cost Accounting of Remedial Options

What is the Problem? The federal and state governments have been conducting a coordinated remediation of the leaking site under the 1980 West Valley Demonstration Project Act, with the Department of Energy (DOE) providing 90% of the funding and the NYS Energy Research & Development Authority (NYSERDA) providing 10%. While important remedial work has been done—making the high-level liquid reprocessed waste into a solid—the underground radioactive sludge and tanks and waste burial grounds have not been remediated. The government agencies will soon make final site closure decisions, yet they have not fully investigated or seriously considered exhumation of all the long-lasting nuclear waste buried throughout the leaking site or done a full-cost accounting in their Draft Environmental Impact Statement which has been on hold since 1996.

Why Conduct a West Valley Exhumation Study? Before any decision is made on final site closure, technical experts need to investigate the environmental and economic aspects of exhuming the leaking West Valley site—and conduct a full-cost accounting study comparing exhumation to long-term monitoring/remedial maintenance of the eroding buried waste for thousands of years. Government has a duty to prevent harm to public health and the environment where credible evidence exists that harm is likely to occur, and to carefully assess options using the best available science, with full public input, to select the safest and most sustainable solution.

■ **Eroding into Great Lakes Basin:** Highly radioactive waste at the site will be extremely hazardous for *over ten thousand* years, but the waste is buried in glacial till which can erode into the Great Lakes Basin Area in *hundreds* of years. Freeze-thaw cracking and erosion plague the site. Eventually, the waste could spread contaminating the region's drinking water supply and the entire downstream Great Lakes watershed. Currently, an underground plume of radioactive Strontium 90 is moving through the water table off site. While the federal government denies responsibility and the state claims it is unauthorized to do anything about it, the plume continues to move downstream from the site towards communities and the Seneca Nation of Indians Cattaraugus Reservation via Cattaraugus Creek.

■ **Long-Term Economically Depressed Region?** The economically depressed communities of West Valley and surrounding Springville and Ashford, NY have unfairly suffered the burden of this country's high-level radioactive waste for decades. The site was promised as an economic engine for the area, yet the 3300-acre site remains untaxed and unusable by residents. The gradual reduction of the site workforce is leaving the community desperate, struggling to pass school budgets and lacking income sources. Leaving the buried waste at the site would make this a permanent problem and burden for these communities.

Why Conduct a Full-Cost Accounting of West Valley Remedial Options? Which remedial option would best prevent harm and protect drinking water supplies in this critically important Great Lakes watershed—buried, long-lasting nuclear wastes or precautionary exhumation of the wastes? Neither the impacted communities nor government can answer this question without an

investigation and cost comparison analysis. Full-cost accounting will provide a meaningful comparison of remedial options at the site—allowing the impacted communities, local, state and federal government and interested organizations to make an informed decision. Full-cost accounting ensures that all expenses are included in an evaluation, including operation, maintenance, disposal, storage and all health, environmental and economic impacts based on a practical, long-term timeframe.

■ **Buried Waste:** What are the real costs of leaving the buried waste at the site? How much will it cost to continually monitor and maintain the site for thousands of years? How much will it cost to continually perform stop-gap measures to deal with more and more radioactive leaks? How much would it cost if institutional controls failed at the site and waste moved off-site? How much would it cost to remediate highly radioactive pollution of drinking water wells, groundwater and soil in the region? What is the cost of losing irreplaceable natural resources if contaminated? Would we be able to recover if the Great Lakes watershed—currently 24% of the world’s supply of fresh water—were poisoned by nuclear contamination? What are the medical costs if the health of workers and/or the community is impaired from exposure to radioactive contamination from polluted wells, remedial maintenance, etc.?

■ **Exhumation:** How much would it cost to excavate the waste at West Valley? How much would it cost to clean up the site to protective standards? How much would it cost to then maintain the waste in monitored, retrievable above ground storage containers until new technologies or a permanent solution is reached on high and low level radioactive waste? What are the economic benefits of reclaiming the land at the site for reuse by the community? How many jobs would be created with an exhumation project? What have been the costs of exhumation at other federal sites?

Recommend Study with Public Participation: Our organizations recommend a comprehensive West Valley study of waste exhumation and a full-cost accounting to compare exhumation to long-term monitoring/remedial maintenance at the site. Such a study needs to be conducted with input from a public Advisory Committee, comprised of community residents, local government officials, environmental, health, civic and occupational organizations, technical experts, and a public participation plan.