Last of Umatilla Depot's chemical weapons destroyed, now the cleanup begins

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By

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HERMISTON -- The Army incinerated the last of its deadly stockpile of mustard agents Tuesday at the Umatilla Chemical Depot, bringing a watershed change to the most nightmarish piece of real estate in Oregon.

"It's time now for high fives and hugs!" said Kim Jackson, operations manager for the depot's weapons incineration program, as the final steel barrel containing the blister agent H.D., identical to mustard gas used in World War I, went into the incinerator at 9:20 a.m.

"By eliminating this stockpile, you have made this community a safer place to live," she said.

Joined by about 40 depot workers and half a dozen members of the media, Jackson watched on closed-circuit TV as the one-ton container finished its short journey through a 1,400-degree natural gas furnace 200 yards away.

Now comes the return of at least part of this sprawling 19,728-acre military installation to public use. For nearly 50 years, the depot has served as a repository for 7.4 million pounds of fearsome Cold War-era chemicals, roughly 11.5 percent of the U.S.

**The chemicals:**
The depot's chemical weapons inventory included:

-- Tons of World War I-era mustard agents, often contained in one-ton bulk containers and referred to as HD.

-- GB (sarin) and VX created by Nazi scientists during the Hitler era and designed to kill by asphyxiation or paralysis on skin contact.

-- More than 106,000 M-55 rockets filled with sarin.

**Not really gas:**
The term nerve gas was something of a misnomer. Many of the substances here were heavy liquids designed to be spread by detonation of a weapon and as aerosols to be...
likely to find themselves in Libya and Russia helping with weapons cleanups there.

Still undecided is what's to happen to the depot land when the Army's mission ends.

An original reuse blueprint devised at a cost of $1 million over two decades by a special commission had earmarked it for commercial-industrial development, an Oregon National Guard tank training site and 5,600 acres of sage-steppe habitat overseen by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and local tribes.

That plan ran aground last summer when the Army failed to destroy the last of the depot's war chemicals by a Sept. 15 deadline set six years earlier as part of an overall Pentagon plan to downsize its military operations. That missed deadline could mean the base will go to the U.S. General Services Administration, the government's property management agency, for disposal as it sees fit.

Federal legislation is being considered to return the decision authority to the commission, Hackett said.

Then there's the matter of a much-needed base cleanup. Portions of the depot remain littered with tons of unexploded conventional weapons, ordinance and debris. Sandy-bottomed "washout lagoons" are filled with chemically contaminated soil where "pink water" saturated with high explosives was settled out in the 1950s and 1960s. That could take several years beyond the time allotted to demolish the incinerators, Perkins said.

Also to be decided is the fate of 40 percent of the depot's land area that's covered with 1,001 steel-reinforced concrete storage igloos, including the highly secure 200-igloo "K-block" where the war chemicals were stored.

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