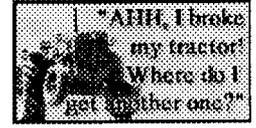


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EDITORIALS

Lower cleanup standard heightens risk at INEEL

Our view: The Department of Energy needs to recognize local concerns about leaving contaminated waste in place at INEEL. Federal energy officials say nobody will want to live on land that currently makes up the Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory -- not even 100 years from now. That's smart.

What's not so clever is how the federal government is using that obvious conclusion to efficiently ignore Idahoans' concerns about contaminated soil above the Snake River Plain Aquifer.

As part of a recent public hearing tour, Magic Valley residents expressed their dissatisfaction with a quicker and cheaper cleanup proposed by the Energy Department. The plan includes lower cleanup standards for contaminated soils located at the eastern Idaho nuclear energy site.

The INEEL site includes numerous acres with buried waste and contaminated soil, resting directly above the Snake River Plain Aquifer. The aquifer provides drinking and irrigation water to 200,000 southern Idahoans.

Department officials know the aquifer is the key issue in INEEL's relationship with southern Idaho. But under the proposed changes in cleanup standards, that concern doesn't appear to weigh heavily with the government.

(By way of background, the contaminated soil at stake in this proposal is not related to the transuranic waste that was buried in pits at INEEL decades ago. That issue is being played out in the federal courts. This issue revolves around soil at INEEL contaminated by radioactive materials through accidents, leaks or releases.)

For years the cleanup project has operated under a stated assumption that land at the site would be put to residential use in 100 years. That meant waste needed to be excavated 10 feet deep (standard depth for a home's basement).

Obviously, the site isn't going to become a condo courtyard in 2104. So the Energy Department wants to use an industrial standard for soil excavation instead of a residential standard. That means digging out 4 feet of soil, not 10 feet.

This change should reduce cleanup costs for the government. But what will it cost Idahoans who already live downstream from INEEL?

By taking a less aggressive approach to contaminated soil that is deeper in the ground, the government appears to be backing away from its commitment to remove waste that is a lingering threat to the aquifer.

It's worth noting that the department says it intends to pursue cleanup of existing groundwater contamination. And officials say that contaminated elements have not migrated beyond INEEL's boundaries. Furthermore, studies have not conclusively shown that contaminants are migrating toward the aquifer on other geologic material -- something known as the "piggyback method."

But no one knows what kind of seismic shifts can occur 10, 20 or 50 years into the future. Changing the excavation standard to 4 feet from 10 feet would reduce the work of eliminating that risk. The truth is, buried waste remains a long-term threat to southern Idaho's main water source.

Idahoans can't afford to underestimate that risk, and neither should the federal government.

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