ENTERED

Whose mess is it, anyway?

This story was published in Editorial on Sunday, November 25, 2001.

WELDON SPRING

PROTECTING Missouri's citizens and environment from the legacy of The Bomb is no less a federal obligation than national defense. But the Department of Energy's plan to monitor and secure contaminated wastes from the atomic era at Weldon Spring is unacceptably vague and inadequate even by the government's own standards. Equally distressing is the DOE's nonchalance, bordering on arrogance, in failing to respond to Missouri officials' concerns about the plan.

As reported last week by Bill Lambrecht of the Post-Dispatch Washington Bureau, the Department of Energy is completing its 16-year cleanup at Weldon Spring, about 30 miles west of St. Louis in St. Charles County. The site was used in the 1940s and 1950s to make bombs and process uranium for weapons and nuclear fuel.

After a $900 million cleanup, the "containment cell," as the tomb of wastes is called, covers 45 acres and stands 75 feet high. It holds 1.5 million cubic yards of radioactive and chemical wastes removed from 44 structures on the site. Entire buildings were shredded and interred with tons of contaminated soil beneath clay, a synthetic liner, more layers of gravel and sand and more than three feet of rock. One St. Charles County official described it as "a rock pile on top of a giant Tupperware container full of stuff you wouldn't want to touch with a 10,000-foot pole."

With less than a year until the cleanup is complete, the DOE's level of commitment to safeguarding the site in perpetuity is critical not only to Missouri but also to other communities across the nation where similar cleanup operations are under way. Yet the DOE's draft plan for Weldon Spring -- its third -- is unclear about who will be responsible for monitoring and securing the site, for testing the surrounding water for contamination and for overseeing material that will be dangerous for centuries.

The plan calls for Energy Department offices in two, or perhaps three, states to play a role. The lines of federal authority and accountability should be crystal clear, not, as Missouri's top environmental official, Steve Mahfood, says, "management muddle." Still unresolved is the important question of who will pay to monitor and maintain the site for years -- if

33254

not centuries -- to come. A preliminary suggestion was made that less than $4,000 in federal funds will be available to state and local agencies. For an agency that spends $173 million a year to help Russia safeguard its nuclear materials, more should be available on our own soil.

Granted, the focus of the DOE's attention has been on other things since Sept. 11, as it has for every federal agency. But with the cleanup nearly "complete," the DOE has a responsibility to make its intentions clear to Missouri, and to uphold its obligation to ensure the integrity and security of Weldon Spring. To see that it does so, Missouri's congressional delegation -- in particular Reps. Roy Blunt, R-Springfield, and Karen McCarthy, D-Kansas City, who serve on the House Energy Committee -- should be asking hard questions and demanding complete answers.

Published in the Editorial section of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch on Sunday, November 25, 2001.
Copyright (C)2001, St. Louis Post-Dispatch