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Pueblo Chemical Depot

New life for old warhorse

Commander: 'This place is about to get busy'

By Chris Woodka

Wild wind whipped across empty acres strewn with tumbleweeds at Pueblo Chemical Depot as media were ushered Thursday around the Army reserve.

A herd of pronghorn grazed undisturbed as reporters listened to the storied history of the depot. Built in 1942 and at its peak employing 8,000, it was almost a city unto itself. Many buildings, stacks of ammunition and other activities are only memories, and most of what remains needs repairs. There's hidden, but persistent contamination of soil and water from decades of the Army doing what the Army had to do.

And signs of a revival.

The newly completed Pueblo Chemical Agent-Destruction Pilot Plant rises in shiny splendor out of the prairie on the northeast corner of the depot, massive in scale and poised to begin the final mission of destroying 780,000 World War II-era munitions containing mustard agent.

The parking lot at the plant contains so many cars — 1,800 people now work at the depot — that it looks like a Walmart on a busy day.

Lines of rail cars fill the tracks that crisscross the depot. Most of them are equipped to haul Vestas wind turbine towers all over the country, but there are also passenger and freight cars in storage or awaiting repairs.

Among the rows of concrete igloos, some folks driving an SUV are checking out items they have in storage through a lease with PuebloPlex, the agency redeveloping the depot.

"This place is about to get as busy as it's been since the first Gulf War," Col. Thomas Duncan tells reporters. Earlier in the day he had hosted U.S. Rep. Scott Tipton, R-Colo., on a separate tour. "It's not just us out here. There's a lot of eyes on us from the Department of Defense. Everything we do is checked and double-checked."

Final mission

The depot was targeted for eventual closure in 1988, and by the mid-1990s had shipped off most of the military weapons and equipment still held in storage. The only mission

that remains is to destroy the chemical weapons that were manufactured in Denver and shipped to Pueblo in the 1950s. The concrete igloos they sit in have such natural climate control that less than one in 1,000 ever leaked.

The 569 problem weapons were destroyed over the past year by a special explosive process that will be kept on site to deal with future snags.

The bulk of the weapons will be disassembled by machines and drained. Fuses in the weapons will be shipped to Anniston, Ala., while the mustard agent will be destroyed at PCAPP. The Army and Bechtel hope to have the plant up and running by June.

“The first testing period will be 32-36 weeks,” said Rick Holmes, Bechtel project manager. “There will be very low numbers in the early days as we collect data.”

The data is needed for a state permit. More than 2,000 samples will be collected and analyzed, while thousands of air samples are collected daily.

“There is a lot of automation to minimize human intervention,” said Greg Mohrman, PCAPP manger.

There are 16 bioreactors, each at 47,000 gallons, that will use water and activated sludge from Colorado Springs to neutralize the chemical agent.

Past contamination

At the same time, work will continue on cleaning up contamination at the depot. Of 60 sites identified as contaminated in the 1990s, the 26 most difficult remain, explained Chris Pulskamp, chief of environmental management.

This year, an influx of \$70 million is speeding up the cleanup. An estimated \$200 million has been spent so far.

“The closer we get to closing, the more money there is for cleanup,” Pulskamp said.

Most of the sites have soil contaminated by heavy metals, PCBs or oil. Duncan explained that the Army followed standard practices of disposing of materials for decades, but updated scientific standards and laws now require more advanced treatment.

Two groundwater plumes contaminated by explosives or solvents are among the trickiest problems, but are 65-85 percent complete after years of treatment.

The environmental work is being done to complement redevelopment.

Future prospects

PuebloPlex, the state agency charged with depot reuse, will finalize its 100-year plan on Tuesday, said Russell DeSalvo, CEO and president.

The first phase of creating the plan was done with a \$700,000 grant from the Pentagon's Office of Economic Adjustment. PuebloPlex is preparing to apply for a \$2.5 million-\$3 million grant to implement the plan.

By the end of the year, PuebloPlex plans to take possession of 5,400 acres of the depot, mostly the cleanest area where 600 storage igloos are located as well as the 39 miles of rail on the depot. The Army declared 16,000 acres of the 23,000-acre military reservation surplus property in 2013.

"It's the size of Miami, Fla.," DeSalvo said.

PuebloPlex has worked with the Army under a master lease agreement for the past 20 years, and now leases about one-third of the igloos as well as some warehouses.

The goal is to use the land to create jobs, with the eventual goal of returning as much as possible to property tax rolls, DeSalvo said.

Long-term, it could lead to an additional 58,000 jobs, but that won't happen overnight. DeSalvo likes to call it a "100-year march."

"We have a plan for this facility that emphasizes manufacturing and industrial uses, but we have to remain flexible," DeSalvo said. "The potential is big. That's why it's important for us to get started as soon as possible."

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SEE DEPOT, 2B



Hawk Conrad, chief of the Pueblo Chemical Depot operations center, explains how weapons are stored and will be handled in the chemical weapons destruction program.

CHIEFTAIN PHOTOS/CHRIS WOODKA



An igloo at Pueblo Chemical Depot holds dummy rounds and training equipment for the Pueblo Chemical Agent-Destruction Pilot Plant.

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PuebloPlex CEO and President Russell DeSalvo is interviewed by television journalists at a media day at Pueblo Chemical Depot.

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