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LOCAL NEWS

EPA: Progress seen at Starmet

By *Betsy Levinson / Staff Writer*
 Thursday, October 30, 2003

With a bevy of environmental engineers on board, the preliminary "remedial investigation and feasibility study" is poised to begin at the Starmet Superfund site in West Concord.

Drawing up a "work plan" to identify and remove contaminants from the 46-acre former Nuclear Metals, Inc., the state and federal environmental and public health authorities are using an initial \$10 million that was assessed primarily from the U.S. Army and Department of Energy, along with other owners or operators of the facility from 1958 to the present: MONY Life Insurance Co., Textron, Inc. and Whittaker Corp., a group known as "potentially responsible parties."

Environmental Protection Agency project manager Melissa Taylor explained that the site, originally a gunpowder plant, was listed as a federal Superfund in 2001, years after toxic contaminants were found in a water supply well. Nuclear Metals made munitions with depleted uranium under contract to the U.S. Army.

Taylor said progress toward site restoration has been slow but is picking up speed. In 1985, a holding basin was capped to prevent wider contamination. In 1997, the EPA oversaw the disposal of 8,000 containers of contaminated soil, and in that year the state public health agency took over the federal license to possess and handle radioactive materials. Over the past two years, the landfill at the site has been fenced, a former holding basin and landfill were temporarily covered, and debris from the site was excavated and removed at a total cost of \$1.2 million.

The first step in the giant project is to issue a report outlining the extent of the contamination and how to approach the clean-up. The report is due in December of this year.

After assigning the "potentially responsible parties," the EPA hammered out an agreement worth \$10 million to conduct the site assessment. To accomplish the remedial investigation and feasibility work, a national consulting firm, de maximis was hired. De maximis project manager Bruce Thompson hired three other specialty consulting firms to handle various aspects of the assessment, such as risk to human health, and extent of water and soil contamination.

In response to an audience question about current health risks from living near the facility, Thompson said there is no air pollution emanating from the site, the contaminated soil has been covered over, and the tainted water is confined to the site.

"We will figure out what is wrong at the site, assess the risk and figure out what to do," said Thompson. He said the project is complicated and may take a decade or more to finish.

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"This site is not a simple one," he said. He has divided the acreage up into 18 different areas so he and his staff can better perform testing and write a work plan. He described the "complex media" there, such as groundwater, soil, lagoons, bogs, and bedrock that must all be tested.

"The site has the highest level of difficulty across many levels," he said.

A key part of the Superfund designation, Taylor said, was public involvement. A citizens group, Citizens Research & Environmental Watch, or CREW, is working with the federal and state authorities. CREW received a \$50,000 grant from the EPA for technical assistance. Another committee, the 2229 Main St. Committee, is advocating for local concerns.

Taylor said the Army and energy departments are paying for 98 percent of the investigation phase.

Thompson said another community meeting will likely be held in January 2004 after the initial assessment report is in the EPA's hands.

A new Web site is devoted to progress at the site: www.NMIsite.org.

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