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DOE Idaho site reaches 20-year cleanup milestone

IDAHO FALLS, ID- In two decades of Superfund cleanup work, the U.S. Department of Energy's Idaho site has removed hundreds of thousands of cubic yards of radioactive and hazardously contaminated soils, excavated radioactive waste buried since the 1950s, removed three nuclear reactors and hundreds of buildings, completely closed three major nuclear facilities and removed thousands of unexploded ordnance shells and fragments.

Last month marked the 20-year anniversary of the signing and implementation of a cleanup agreement between DOE, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the state of Idaho. In two decades, the cleanup agreement known as the Federal Facility Agreement and Consent Order has never been revised and DOE's cleanup contractors have met all but four of the literally hundreds of milestones outlined in the document. The missed milestones were subsequently renegotiated.

"We've made great progress in cleaning up the Idaho site, further protecting the Snake River Plain Aquifer," said James Cooper, deputy manager for DOE Idaho's Cleanup Project. "The visible progress in just the last five years is staggering."

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds, appropriated in 2009, helped the Idaho Cleanup Project accelerate many legacy projects by several years. At the beginning of the Site's cleanup mission, it was believed that cleanup of hundreds of radioactive, hazardous and debris sites would take until 2035 or later to complete. DOE accelerated the cleanup mission of the Site, with the bulk of work predicted for completion within the next several years, saving taxpayers billions of dollars.

The Idaho National Laboratory was added to the EPA's Superfund National Priorities List in 1989 due to the 890-square-mile Site's potential impact on the underlying Snake River Plain Aquifer, a Lake Erie-sized body of water that runs underground from Ashton to Thousand Springs, Idaho. Prior to becoming a Superfund site, INL discharged contamination into unlined ponds, had leaks from its facilities and underground storage tank piping and injected water directly into the aquifer. Although INL implemented common industrial disposal techniques at the time, those activities threatened the aquifer.

Of most concern was the potential impact to the aquifer beneath the Radioactive Waste Management Complex, where barrels and boxes of radioactive and hazardous waste were buried from 1952 until 1970 within a 97-acre area known as the Subsurface Disposal Area. Since 1996,

solvent vapors that were released from the barrels and boxes as they degraded over time have been removed by a series of vacuum extraction units that suck the vapors from the ground and destroy the solvents by heating up the material in the same manner as an automobile catalytic converter. Crews have been digging up the waste since January 2005.

Cleanup at the Subsurface Disposal Area also continues. The project is anticipated to be completed ahead of schedule, with a soil cap placed over the entire landfill. The cap will prevent any remaining pollutants from migrating deeper in to the subsurface or the aquifer.

"We've continually picked up the pace of waste exhumation since we were awarded the cleanup contract in 2005," said CH2M-WG Idaho, LLC., president and CEO Tom Dieter. "Being able to begin cap construction several years ahead of schedule will save taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars."

A cap will also be installed over the Tank Farm located at the Idaho Nuclear Technology and Engineering Center, formerly known as the Chem Plant. About 900,000 gallons of radioactive and hazardous liquid waste remains in three 300,000-gallon tanks within the Tank Farm. The tanks will be emptied by December 2012, and filled with a cement grout.

"Many of these cleanup projects are undertaken with protection of the aquifer being the top priority," said Cooper. "All contaminated sites that have impacted the aquifer have either been addressed or are currently being addressed. That's encouraging news."

CH2M-WG Idaho, LLC, (CWI) is a partnership comprised of CH2MHill and the URS Corporation that directs the Idaho Cleanup Project at the Department of Energy's Idaho Site located 45 miles west of Idaho Falls. The 7-year, $2.9 billion project, funded through the U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Environmental Management, focuses on early risk reduction and protection of the Snake River Plain Aquifer.

For more information visit the Idaho Cleanup Project on the Web at https://idahocleanupproject.com

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