

Nashville Tennessean Nov 20, 2019

OPINION

Alexander should ensure TDEC has funding for landfill oversight in Oak Ridge | Opinion

Don Safer, Guest columnist Published 5:00 a.m. CT Nov. 20, 2019

The EPA and TDEC have insisted that management of landfill water must meet the EPA's Superfund requirements that limit potential cancer risk.

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Story Highlights

- Don Safer is a longtime member of the board of the Tennessee Environmental Council and Know Nuclear Committee Chair of the Tennessee Chapter of the Sierra Club.

Sometimes it seems that Washington is more of a jungle than a swamp. Or maybe even a shark tank.

The U.S. Department of Energy's [Oak Ridge Reservation](#) is a [federal Superfund site](#) that the government spends around \$500 million a year [to clean up](#). The project is projected to go on for decades. Five years ago the total cost was estimated at over \$12 billion. The eventual cost in dollars is likely to be far higher.

The cost to residents' health, the local environment and those downstream both now and far into the future will be determined by the effectiveness of that mitigation project. As the saying goes, the devil is in the details. You can't just throw this stuff in a ditch and forget about it. That is what created this mess in the first place!



Don Safer (Photo: Submitted)

Superfund requirements in jeopardy

Provisions have been inserted into a pending federal appropriations bill and committee report that threaten the health and well-being of Tennesseans. The pending language would gut the ability of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation to ensure that the cleanup of the Oak Ridge Reservation meets Superfund requirements designed to protect public health.

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To remedy the health and environmental threats from radioactive and chemical contamination and offsite releases, DOE's Oak Ridge site was placed on the [National Prioritization List](#) for cleanup. A federal facilities agreement between DOE, the EPA and the state gave oversight authority to the EPA and TDEC and arranged for TDEC to receive federal funding to carry out its oversight duties under the federal facilities agreement. This helps give Tennesseans assurance that cleanup is being done responsibly. There is no state funding for this TDEC oversight work.

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It all started with a landfill

Some years ago, DOE built a landfill onsite as a place to dump contaminated soil and debris from their cleanup. Now this radioactive and hazardous waste landfill is filling up. DOE wants to build a new landfill to take its place. There have been problems managing water at the existing landfill site (Tennessee gets lots of rain!). The EPA and TDEC have insisted that management of water at both the existing landfill and any new landfill must meet the EPA's Superfund requirements that limit potential cancer risk to the public. Instead, DOE wants to use a less restrictive standard that would allow release of water with radioactivity concentrations many times higher than what the EPA has determined to be the legally acceptable risk range under the Superfund designation. TDEC has vigorously supported the EPA in this.



An aerial view of proposed sites for a new low-level nuclear waste landfill on the Oak Ridge Reservations. The U.S. Dept. of Energy Oak Ridge Office of Environmental Management examined 16 sites to identify the best locations for onsite disposal and has selected four potential locations in the Bear Creek Valley. (DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY) (Photo: DOE)

Is DOE going to comply with the law? Apparently not. Instead, a proposed Senate appropriations bill would cut off TDEC's funding to carry out the state's oversight role in the federal facility agreement. And language in another Senate appropriations committee report demands that the EPA explain why it will not allow DOE to use the weaker radiation standard in Oak Ridge, a standard that the EPA has for decades declared "non-protective" and impermissible at Superfund sites.



From left, Department of Energy Director of Sciences Dr. Ray Orbach, ORNL Director Bill Madia, U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander and U.S. Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham sign a shovel after a groundbreaking ceremony for the \$65 million Center for Nanophase Materials Sciences Friday at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. (Photo: Paul Efird/News Sentinel)

U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander should act immediately to ensure continued funding for TDEC's oversight activities in Oak Ridge and to eliminate any congressional language that could have the effect of allowing Tennesseans to be exposed to radiation at levels higher than those allowed by Superfund law. Protecting public health must be job one.

Don Safer is a longtime member of the board of the Tennessee Environmental Council and Know Nuclear Committee Chair of the Tennessee Chapter of the Sierra Club.