

DOE must listen to public about landfill plans

Axel Ringe, Jimmy Groton, Mark Bevelhimer

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Since World War II, the work done at the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Oak Ridge Reservation has been — for the most part — shrouded in secrecy.

But as federal officials now attempt to clean up the hazardous and radioactive materials at this site, it is critical that the public is actively involved in the process and that the DOE listens to concerns from those living nearby.

So far that unfortunately has not been the case, and now DOE is attempting to force through a dangerous proposal that could pollute our waterways and threaten peoples' health with little input from nearby communities.

The Oak Ridge Reservation includes areas used to develop nuclear weapons technologies, as well as the Y-12 National Security Complex, a national center for handling, processing and storing highly enriched uranium. The site was declared a Superfund site by the Environmental Protection Agency in 1989 and contains hundreds of contaminated areas, including old buildings where radioactive material was processed as part of the Manhattan Project during World War II.

We are pleased that the DOE is tearing down these contaminated buildings, but have grave concerns about burying the radioactive material and mercury in a landfill on the site. Without details of the waste acceptance criteria being defined and treatment technologies evaluated, it is likely that this plan includes discharging radionuclide pollutants – including chemicals that are known to cause cancer – into Bear Creek without treating them first.

To put it bluntly: DOE officials want to sacrifice Bear Creek and the health of communities that live downstream in an attempt to rid themselves of their hazardous and radioactive mess.

Not only are these pollutants dangerous – they are bioaccumulative, meaning they will continue to build up in waterways, fish, and other wildlife over time, and threaten to have a major impact on the people

who use, fish, and enjoy Bear Creek, Poplar Creek, and, further downstream, the Clinch River.

As DOE has developed this reckless plan, it has limited public comment periods and changed the proposal without notifying nearby communities. The Department is prioritizing arbitrary cleanup timelines and cost over the concerns from community members about how the landfill will impact people who live in and enjoy this area.

Now, DOE is trying to stifle public input again by denying calls from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Tennessee leaders to reopen public comment periods – something it is legally required to do.

In a letter to the DOE, the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation wrote that “additional public review and comment is warranted on updated groundwater information, approaches for establishing landfill wastewater discharge limits, and significant changes” to the proposal. Still, DOE continues to move forward with its high-risk plan.

This wouldn't be the first time DOE has carried out a risky plan that endangers communities near Oak Ridge Reservation.

The Department has already built one landfill near Bear Creek that has numerous malfunctions, resulting in untreated water and hazardous pollutants being discharged to Bear Creek during severe weather events. The best way to avoid making the same, dangerous mistakes

again is to listen and respond to the growing concerns from nearby communities.

East Tennessee communities are not the DOE's dumping ground. We deserve to have a voice in how DOE cleans up the mess they already made — and discharging radioactive waste into our valuable waterways just isn't the answer.

This column was from Axel C. Ringe, Tennessee Chapter of the Sierra Club; Jimmy Groton, Advocates for the Oak Ridge Reservation; and Mark Bevelhimer, Tennessee Citizens for Wilderness Planning.