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## **U.S. may study buyout around Paducah plant**

Chemicals tainted land's groundwater

**By James R. Carroll**  
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KEVIL, Ky. -- Ronald Lamb was outraged and demanded government compensation after discovering in 1994 that his water well had been tainted by pollution from the nearby Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant.

Now, Lamb said he's intrigued by a measure before Congress calling for the government to study buying the properties of families whose homes and farms sit on top of a plume of groundwater contaminated by degreasing solvents and radioactive chemicals.

"At one time I would not have sold, but if the price was right I would listen," said Lamb, a mechanic who unsuccessfully sued over the pollution. "I hope they don't think they will get it for nothing."

It's not clear how much Lamb and other owners of about 120 homes sitting above 10 billion gallons of contaminated groundwater might get, or how ongoing cleanup efforts would be affected.

But in 2002, local economic development officials estimated such a buyout would cost about \$15 million.

The department is being asked to look into the purchases as a way of saving the government money, according to language inserted by Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., into the \$31.2 billion spending bill for energy and water projects.

"It sounds to me like cut and run," Steve Ellis, vice president of the citizens group Taxpayers for Common Sense, said of how a buyout might affect the cleanup. "I don't think buying people out is the solution."

Tony Hatton, assistant director of the Kentucky Division of Waste Management, which oversees the environmental cleanup at the Paducah plant, said he couldn't see how the federal government would view buying the land as "fitting into any type of remedy" for getting rid of the contamination.

State officials would expect to be brought into the decision and discussions about

its effect on the cleanup, Hatton said.

McConnell, who has said he supports the ongoing cleanup, said a study could answer important questions about what would happen to those efforts if the government buys the land.

The measure passed the Senate 92-3 on July 1 and now goes to a conference with the House, which did not include a similar provision.

### **Limiting liability?**

The contaminated groundwater plume, discovered in 1988, is under about 9,500 acres. It contains the solvent trichloroethylene and radioactive technetium-99, both of which originated in the plant, which produces fuel for nuclear power stations.

Some critics say a buyout would limit the government's future liability for cleaning up the contamination. Other critics wonder what taxpayers have to show for the \$178 million spent on various studies and experimental antipollution technologies, some of which were tried and then abandoned.

"As far as any major results, there aren't any," said Mark Donham, an environmentalist who was the former chairman of the citizens' advisory board that oversaw the plant's cleanup.

But Jim Smart, an associate engineering professor at the University of Kentucky's campus in Paducah who also serves on the advisory board, said it has taken time to evaluate different technologies and to properly study and map the contamination.

"Maybe looking back, the money could have been spent wiser, but that's hindsight," he said.

The Energy Department for about a decade has been paying the West McCracken Water District about \$65,000 a year to provide free municipal water to homes whose well water was tainted by the pollution.

How long a buyout study would take and what would happen to the land after the government bought it is unclear.

Energy Department spokeswoman Laura Schachter said everything the study would cover hasn't been worked out yet, but part of its scope would be "does this effectively help with reducing risks to people and to the environment?"

## Using the land

Some local officials think a buyout would clear the way for local industrial development on the land. But others doubt any company would be attracted to an area dotted with chemical and radioactive contamination.

Schachter insisted her agency is not giving up on the cleanup. She acknowledged the department has talked about studying a buyout, but "later down the line."

"We'll follow the will of Congress," Schachter said of McConnell's request for the study.

Ken Wheeler, chairman of the Greater Paducah Economic Development Council, said the buyout issue originated with the Paducah Area Community Reuse Organization, a federally funded panel looking to offset job losses at the plant and its eventual closing.

In a telephone interview, Wheeler suggested the private property might be consolidated for a more appropriate use. The reuse group in the past has suggested using sites at and around the plant for an industrial park or manufacturing.

Wheeler said he thought the cleanup would continue, regardless of the study's findings.

"The study is to decide on a course of action and assess the interests of the owners," he said.

McConnell learned of preliminary conversations on a buyout late last year and sent a letter to the Energy Department in December asking about the implications of purchasing property near the plant.

Among other things, McConnell wanted to know why the buyout was being looked at as an option for dealing with the contamination, whether such a purchase would save money that could be used for other cleanup projects, and whether buying land over the plume might affect cleanup commitments

"While I understand this proposal may allow (the Energy Department) to reduce its cleanup efforts off-site, I am concerned that this approach may be used as a rationale to discontinue efforts to clean the source of the contamination at the plant site," McConnell wrote to Paul Golan, then the Energy Department's acting assistant secretary for environmental management.

## Neighbors

Although a buyout is only conceptual, it would involve about 120 families from the Heath-Grahamville area whose homes or land sit over the plume.

"If the money's right, I'll sell anything," said Christopher Johnson, who is raising a family on 10 acres and says he likes rural living. "But they will have to dish out some dollars for me to leave."

But others question whether a buyout could lead to the government using eminent domain to

force families off their land.

Bill Tanner, superintendent of the West McCracken Water District and a former member of the citizens' advisory board, doubted the site would appeal to any industry unrelated to nuclear activities or the plant cleanup.

"You're not going to get a General Motors to come in there," Tanner said.

Donham said the key will be establishing a fair market value for the property.

"How do you value two decades or more of living in a toxic environment, having family members getting ill, and seeing the value and heritage of your property go downhill?" he asked. "Yet the government won't compensate for this, and I foresee a lot of bitterness if the government tries to take this property on the cheap."

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