

Deseret Chemical Depot finally destroys last chemical weapons

by Lisa Christensen
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Mission complete, the facility will begin to prepare for remediation and final shutdown

The end of a 15-year project came anti-climactically yesterday afternoon — a worker, wearing coveralls and a gas mask, laid thick mats on top of 23 mustard gas mortars as they came out of an incinerator, stopping any errant gasses from escaping while they cooled.

And just like that, the mission of Deseret Chemical Depot was, for all intents and purposes, over.

The last of more than 1 million munitions was incinerated to the standards of the Chemical Weapons Convention, an international treaty that set a deadline of April 29 of this year for all chemical weapons stockpiles to be destroyed. Since its establishment in 1942, DCD has undergone various stages of destroying the stockpile, but this latest, most earnest effort began in 1996 when the Tooele Chemical Agent Disposal Facility, or TOCDF, was constructed in anticipation and fulfillment of the 1997 treaty.

“Reaching this milestone is surely a credit to the five generations of dedicated workers, the support of the community and the resolve of our nation to destroy these weapons,” said Col. Mark Pomeroy, commander of DCD.

DCD was originally named Deseret Chemical Warfare Depot upon its 1942 selection as a chemical depot. In 1962, the site was realigned under Tooele Army Depot and named the Tooele Army Depot South Area, a designation that stuck until the installation was renamed Deseret Chemical Depot in 1996. In 1979, while still under Tooele Army Depot, the Chemical Agent Munitions Disposal System, or CAMDS, began operations. The disposal techniques demonstrated at CAMDS are now in use at other chemical depots, but CAMDS itself will be decontaminated, dismantled and disposed of now that the mission is complete.

The destruction of the 13,616 tons of chemical agent have required workers to make more than 24,000 chemical deliveries from storage areas of the installation to disposal and demolition facilities — all of which were conducted safely. Ted Ryba, site project manager for TOCDF, said making all operations at DCD as safe as possible was a chief goal for the project.

“Safety has been a priority for the TOCDF team since the beginning,” he said. “Safety of our workers, the surrounding community and the environment.”

The schedule for destroying the different types of chemical agents in the original stockpile is one example of the group’s focus on safety, he said. The nerve agents GB and VX were destroyed first, making the remainder of the stockpile far less of a threat.

Pomeroy said that focus on safety was and is present in every aspect of the operation, though the requirements of the project were steep and the timeframe relatively short. There has never been a fatality at DCD and, as of Wednesday, the installation was nearing 14 million hours worked without an injury severe enough to merit time off of work.

“It had to be done safely. There were no shortcuts taken anywhere along the line,” Pomeroy said. “Meeting a deadline and doing it safely without shortcuts is just something that couldn’t be compromised.”

Although those mustard gas munitions were incinerated Wednesday, the process of incinerating all of the chemical agent is not quite done. Four one-ton containers of lewisite, a blister agent with similar effects as mustard gas but with a different chemical composition,

were drained Tuesday into a liquid incinerator, but that destruction process will take several days. The agent is expected to be completely destroyed by Friday night or Saturday morning.

DCD is one of eight chemical depots around the country, but held 44 percent of the nation's chemical weapons stockpile — more than double the amount held at any other single facility. Besides the sheer quantity of agent at DCD, Pomeroy said the depot was unusual in that there were many types of agent to destroy, while most other facilities only had one type.

“We were a bit unique in that we had two simultaneous campaigns competing neck and neck for completion,” he said.

Even after the lewisite has been destroyed to treaty standards, the lights at DCD cannot be turned off and the gates locked. Companies have been contracted to clean the surface of the depot for debris left over from landfills and other non-chemical disposal, demolition facilities will need to be themselves disposed of and the storage and administrative areas will need to be cleaned and prepared for use by Tooele Army Depot, which will reclaim the facility as its South Area in July 2013. The area presently known as Tooele Army Depot will be referred to as Tooele Army Depot North Area.

Kathy Anderson, public information officer at Tooele Army Depot, said the South Area will be used mainly for storage, and the administrative facilities will hopefully be rented out to contractors or private industry organizations.

“The original intent, and our intent, is it's beneficial for the Army because their storage sites allows us to store additional conventional ammunition, because we'd have additional space. And then there's the possibility of bringing tenants in to help subsidize the cost of the infrastructure,” she said. “Right now that is Tooele Army Depot's plan — use the storage sites, and then later on get partnerships with contractors or private industry.”

The installation's approximately 1,400 employees will have to be prepared for the closure of the facility. Gary McCloskey, manager of TOCDF and vice president of URS, the company contracted by the military to dispose of the agent, said many employees will be retiring, and another quarter of the workforce is participating in company-sponsored education programs to prepare them for jobs after DCD. Another approximate quarter of workers will be transferring to other chemical depots, such as Pueblo Chemical Depot, near Pueblo, Colo., or Blue Grass Army Depot in Kentucky.

McCloskey said the gradual reduction in the workforce, which began last Friday with a 52-worker layoff, is designed to make the transition easier on the workers and community. However, he said, workers were needed until the end, so incentives were offered to some to stay aboard and see the job through to final completion.

Pomeroy said he, for one, has always intended to stay until the bitter end.

“I came here knowing I'd be the last commander of Deseret Chemical Depot,” he said, “and

I'll be here until we hand the keys over to Tooele Army Depot.”

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