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Firm OK'd to destroy arms

Neutralization of mustard agent at Pueblo depot may create 800 jobs

By Tom Ragan The Gazette

PUEBLO— A California engineering company has been selected to destroy more than 2,500 tons of chemical mustard agent at the Pueblo Chemical Depot by 2010.

At a cost of about \$800 million to \$1.5 billion, Bechtel National Inc. will design, build and supervise operations at the Army depot, which has stored the liquid agent in steel and concrete igloos since World War II.

The family-owned company built two other weapons-destruction facilities for the Defense Department, the most recent at Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland. The Pueblo County Commission made the announcement Monday, promising a crowd of more than 100 Bechtel will pump up Pueblo County's economy by creating 500 to 800 jobs.

Joseph Tarlton of Bechtel said the design of the neutralization facility is expected to be completed by Christmas although construction probably won't get under way until 2004.

Destruction of the mustard agent won't start until 2009.

The neutralization facility will be on depot grounds south of the stockpile, which is 15 miles west of Pueblo and two miles north of Avondale said Lt. Col. John Driftmier the Pueblo depot's commander.

The depot is one of eight facilities nationwide that store chemical weapons. The Army was ordered by Congress in 1985 to destroy the nation's stockpile. Concerns about how to do it without endangering the health and welfare of nearby communities led to repeated delays at many stockpiles over whether the stockpile should be incinerated or neutralized with water.

The Pueblo community, along with the Pueblo County Commission and the city of Pueblo, overwhelmingly favored the neutralization process because it is thought to be safest and cheapest. That form of technology was approved by the Pentagon in June.

Bechtel recently finished construction of a neutralization facility in Aberdeen, Md where destruction of a 1,400-ton stockpile is to begin within a few months Tarlton said.

Two years ago, the company built an incineration facility at the Army depot in Anniston Ala where trial burns have not begun.

"We're excited about this", Tarlton told the crowd inside the Sangre de Cristo Arts and Conference Center. "This is definitely one of the biggest days in the history of our company, and we're going to take this opportunity and work with you guys and make this a tremendous success."

John Klomp, a Pueblo County commissioner, said the operation, from construction to destruction should bring as much as \$80 million to the Pikes Peak region for goods and services and supplies needed for the facility. "This isn't just about destroying a chemical weapon stockpile," Klomp said. "It's about bringing a major company to town, and it's only fitting that Pueblo shares some of those economic benefits after storing the agent for more than 50 years."

An open house is scheduled from 4 to 6p.m. on Oct. 9 to inform the people of Pueblo about the company and answer questions. It will be at the Sangre de Cristo Arts and Conference Center 1001 N. Santa Fe.