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Hotline

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Pueblo happily hangs on to mustard gas

by **Patrick Farrell**

While most states are eager to see hazardous materials head for the nearest border, Colorado has decided to cling to the aging chemical weapons stored at the Army's Pueblo Chemical Depot.

Federal legislation passed May 12 will keep Pueblo's 780,000 Cold War-era mustard gas shells on site for destruction, after a tense period when the fate of the weapons seemed unsure.

In 2002, the U.S. Department of Defense announced plans to destroy the shells on-site to meet a 2012 deadline imposed by an international chemical weapons treaty. The Army planned to use an innovative water neutralization process instead of traditional incineration methods. But early this year, after projected construction and processing costs had ballooned from \$1.5 billion to \$2.6 billion, the Defense Department began studying cheaper disposal methods, including a controversial proposal to ship the gas shells to an out-of-state depot for incineration.

"People went ballistic," says Ross Vincent, former head of Better Pueblo, a local environmental and labor coalition that had lobbied for on-site water neutralization. Area residents were outraged over the possibility of lost local jobs, while people across the region, worried about the health, environmental and terrorism risks associated with transporting and incinerating the weapons.

Responding to the outcry, Sens. Wayne Allard, R-Colo., and Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., sponsored legislation that halts all further study of moving the weapons and earmarks \$372 million to redesign the plans for their on-site destruction.

Vincent says the bill, which virtually guarantees 1,000 short-term construction jobs and 200 to 300 operation jobs over the next decade, brought a "huge sigh of relief in the community." But he says the Pentagon's delay may still cause problems, making it "difficult, if not impossible to meet treaty deadlines."

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