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New chemical weapons report released

WEAPONS REPORT SAYS PENTAGON DECISION SHOULD COME THIS YEAR

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A scientific report released Thursday by an organization that once supported incineration gives a thumbs up for neutralization of the chemical weapons at Blue Grass Army Depot.

"Analysis of Engineering Design Studies for Demilitarization of Assembled Chemical Weapons at Blue Grass Army Depot" is the latest of a series of evaluations by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences.

An international treaty ratified in 1997 required chemical weapons in some 170 countries to be destroyed by 2007. A debate has accompanied the issue in Madison County, home to 2 percent of the nation's original stockpile of chemical weapons.

Four technologies could be used

to dispose of the weapons. Since it was announced in 1984 that these weapons would be destroyed, the public has opposed incineration, the Army's choice. There are three alternatives for consideration, two of which involved neutralizing the agents.

"We have a long history of citizens opposing incineration," said Craig Williams, director of the Berea-based Chemical Weapons Working Group, a coalition that opposes incineration. "Then elected officials joined them. Now you've got scientific basis on which to validate that position."

The report addresses one form of neutralization that has no outstanding issues after the product is destroyed. It involves super critical water oxidation after the agents are neutralized.

Contrary to incineration, neutralization technologies can contain and control chemical warfare

agents and the process by-products.

"Once you have it destroyed, you analyze it to see if you reached the level of destruction," Williams said. "If not, continue and test it again. Before the stuff leave the vat, you know you've destroyed it."

The Pentagon is expected to make a decision about the destruction of the depot's chemical weapons by the end of the year.

"We've spent a long time developing and trying to educate ourselves of both technologies, understanding there is a big push to use an alternative to incineration," said state Sen. Ed Worley. "What we're really waiting on is the assistant secretary of the Army to make final decision on type of technology."

Worley has seen reports that respond to both sides of the debate, and he expected such a response in the most recent report.

"It's significant because a reputable organization looked at a good amount of data," Worley said.

The NRC is an organization the Army respects. In 1984, the council recommended incineration, a method the Army formerly opposed, said Dick

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MITCH MCCONNELL,
U.S. SENATOR

Sloan, chemical activities spokesman at the depot. Technology has advanced and developed since then, Sloan said.

U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell has supported investigating alternative technologies. Williams said without McConnell's 1997 legislature, incineration would have no viable alternatives.

"The community and I have longed believed there was a better way to tackle the challenges of destroying the stockpile at the Blue Grass Army Depot, and (Thursday's) report is a welcome and enthusiastic endorsement of our belief in a safer way," McConnell said in a statement. "I won't rest until the Army has similarly endorsed the common sense approach of using alternatives to incineration for the destruction of the Blue Grass weapons."

In its report, the NRC calls neutralization a safe method for the depot. The council also said it will take time to systemize the process, but Williams said that is expected with any technology.

The report said, "The reverse assembly of munitions, followed by water or caustic hydrolysis of nerve or mustard agents and associated energetic materials, is a mature, safe and effective method for initial treatment of the chemical weapons stored at Blue Grass Army Depot."