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Slag removal to begin at former Chemetco site

Published: September 16, 2013 Updated 23 hours ago

By WILL BUSS — News-Democrat

The mountain of slag at the former Chemetco plant in Hartford has been cleared for removal, marking the final chapter of the plant's polluted history.

A federal judge in the U.S. District Court in East St. Louis approved a consent decree late Friday to begin removing the pile of heavy metals left over at the 324-acre site. The copper smelting foundry on Illinois 3 went bankrupt and closed in 2001 amid scandal. The year before, Chemetco Inc. pleaded guilty to conspiracy and to violating the Clean Water Act.

Two years ago this week, demolition began on the foundry that was reduced to the large pile of slag. Next, copper, tin, lead and zinc from the slag will be marketed to other smelting plants over the next five to seven years.

Industrial Asset Disposition performed the demolition and its sister company, Paradigm Minerals & Environmental Services, in Hartford, will be setting up the processing operations over the next few months.

Steve Zuber got involved in the clean up as a principal with the BarberMurphy Group in Shiloh to solidify the property's asset purchase agreement. He has helped establish a new company, Paradigm Minerals and Environmental Services, which is going to process the slag and monitor the eventual new property owner.

"Most of the material will be sold as a metal commodity," Zuber said. "It will be sold to secondary smelters and used as commodity until we get the plant up and running to do processing ourselves."

Kevin Turner, a project manager from the Environmental Protection Agency, said he expected the on-site slag process to get underway early next year.

The 41-acre plant opened in 1969. In 1999, the company was prosecuted for dumping pollutants into nearby Long Lake over the course of a decade via a secret, illegal pipeline. It discharged heavy metals and byproducts into the Mississippi River tributary until it was discovered by state inspectors in 1996.

In January 2000, the company pleaded guilty to conspiracy and to violating the Clean Water Act. Chemetco was ordered to pay \$3.86 million in fines and to pay for the cleanup was also sued by a number of property owners around Long Lake. However, the company declared bankruptcy on Nov. 13, 2001, two weeks after it closed. On Dec. 7, 2001, the Illinois EPA issued an order to seal Chemetco. Today, the ground water no longer indicates any trace of contamination.

Turner said the EPA is pleased to see this site cleaned up after several years.

"It's been well known," Turner said. "Everybody who drives up and down Route 3 sees it. It's an eyesore. It's heavy metal associated with slag, moving this from a negative and just 'let's talk about it' to a 'let's get something done' and clean up, it's absolutely a huge deal."

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