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Despite pandemic, SRS achieves cleanup success

BY DR. JAMES MARRA
Guest columnist

We all understand the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic: tremendous impacts on our health and the health of family and friends, but also a real knock-out punch to some businesses, industries, sports, and other areas, affecting nearly every corner of our lives.

However, thanks to continued rigorous safety protocols initiated at the Savannah River Site (SRS) by the Department of Energy and its contractors, the nuclear world around us has proven, again, to be among the safest places on earth.

In addition to ensuring the safety and health of workers, the critical cleanup work at the Site has continued unabated, even during the pandemic. The workers have continued to prove that they are up to the challenge of making the lives of everyone in the community a little safer every day.

For example, the radioactive liquid waste program has been transformed to dramatically increase production rates, and now there truly is an end in sight where high-level waste will be treated and waste tanks permanently closed. The Salt Waste Processing Facility (SWPF) began radioactive operations in 2021. This facility will put the treatment of high-level tank waste into a different gear, helping eliminate the

waste that the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (SCDH-EC) calls the single greatest environmental threat in the state.



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In its first year of operation, the facility treated more than 2 million gallons of waste. While there have been some operational challenges (not uncommon for first-of-a-kind facilities), SWPF is on a path to significantly increase throughput this year. The operation of SWPF has led to record setting performances of downstream treatment of the tank waste.

Production of high-level waste glass is ramping up again in the Defense Waste Processing Facility, and record-setting production of low-level grouted waste (over 5 million gallons) was produced in the Saltstone facility and employed in disposal units. The construction of additional Saltstone disposal units is underway and plans are in the works to complete construction of all the needed units to complete the mission.

Environmental cleanup has also made great progress at SRS. The site just recently achieved its 4,000th environmental compliance milestone. This program began in 1993 when the state and federal regulators enacted the Federal

Facility Agreement. The FFA requires site operators to come to agreement of cleanup paths with SCDHEC and the Environmental Protection Agency. Now, 4,000 milestones have been completed – all on or ahead of schedule!

An important agreement was also recently reached with South Carolina and federal environmental regulators on the final cleanup of a 25-mile-long stream corridor at SRS that was contaminated as a result of operations during the Cold War. This decision marks the first ever agreed upon with the regulators and the public that outlines the final closure for a large parcel of stream systems.

Additionally, an environmental cleanup milestone was met in 2021, with the deactivation of 50 buildings at SRS since 2008. This totaled more than 1 million square feet of space.

So, despite the challenges of the pandemic, the successes of waste and environmental cleanup at SRS are numerous. This provides confidence that legacy wastes will be cleaned up and that environmental health and safety will be at the forefront of new missions.

I'm glad we can count on the SRS workforce to continue to rise to the occasion, even in the face of a pandemic.

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