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Army agrees to extend talks over nerve agent

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By **Tara Grassia**
Staff Writer

PENNSVILLE TWP. -- An agreement was reached Thursday to extend the public comment period for 60 days on a proposal to treat and dispose of a byproduct of the deadly chemical weapon nerve agent VX at the DuPont Chambers Works here.

At a special meeting at the office of U.S. Sen. Jon S. Corzine, D-N.J., in Washington, a U.S. Army official agreed to the extension and to arrange a public information session in the near future to answer questions about the plan.

The nerve agent VX was originally manufactured by the U.S. for military use as a chemical weapon and is considered among the deadliest of all chemicals. DuPont is currently bidding for the contract to process the neutralized byproduct of VX at its waste treatment facility on the grounds of the Chambers Works here.

"It was a very good meeting and we are pleased about this response," said Corzine spokesman David Wald. "This responds to the fact that there are real concerns in Salem County and that is why this public information session is very important."

Attending the meeting Thursday were representatives of Corzine and Sen. Frank R. Lautenberg, D-N.J., U.S. Reps. Rob Andrews, D-1st Dist. and Frank LoBiondo, R-2nd Dist. Gov. James E. McGreevey. Also present were Delaware government officials and the DuPont Co., according to Wald.

Many of those lawmakers had written to the Army this week requesting more information on the disposal plan. McGreevey also wrote to the Army this week expressing his concerns over the plan and calling for more information to be made available.

Environmental groups and members of the public have been expressing their

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concern since the proposal to treat the nerve gas byproduct at DuPont was first reported in late December.

Principal Col. Jesse Barber, Projects Manager for Alternative Technology at the U.S. Army, agreed to the extension of the comment period. Originally, the lawmakers' representatives had requested a 45-day extension on the comment period, but the Army suggested and agreed to an extension of 60 days.

The original 30-day comment period was scheduled to end Jan. 19. The date, time and specific location of the proposed public information meeting is yet to be determined. However, the public meeting is proposed to be held in New Jersey, possibly in Salem County.

The lawmakers involved in Thursday's meeting had written to Geoffrey Prosch, Assistant Secretary of the Army for Installations and Environment, that "our constituents have expressed deep concerns about this proposal and we request that their concerns be given full hearing."

Under the proposed contract, the Army would destroy stockpiles of the chemical nerve agent VX at the Newport Chemical Depot in Newport, Ind., where it is currently stored. The VX will then be neutralized by mixing it with a caustic agent and hot water so it is no longer effective.

Afterward, DuPont would transport the waste byproduct of VX, called hydrolysate, to the DuPont Secure Environmental Treatment at the Chambers Works bio-degradation facility, where it would be further neutralized and treated for disposal into the Delaware River.

According to Chambers Works Plant Manager John Strait, studies on DuPont's behalf are still undergoing to guarantee safety in treatment measures and transportation safety as well as environmental and public safety factors.

"I understand why people would be concerned, but we are going to do everything we can to make people understand what we do and why," Strait said in a previous interview. "We can transport and treat this waste effectively and if we can't do that we are not going to take it."

This would be the second neutralized chemical weapon waste to be disposed of at the Chambers Works. DuPont is already processing a neutralized byproduct of mustard gas, another chemical warfare agent, that is being shipped in from Maryland.

In May 2002, DuPont signed a contract with Bechtel National to truck and treat neutralized mustard agent from Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland and is currently still processing this waste.

DuPont is the largest commercial and industrial wastewater treatment facility in the United States and processes more than 18 million gallons of wastewater daily.

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