

Congress Plans To Switch Agency In Charge Of Waste Cleanup Here

By Kristen Ostendorf

Post Dispatch Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Congress is about to transfer responsibility for cleaning up a mountain of radioactive waste in the St. Louis area from the Energy Department to the Corps of Engineers.

A House-Senate conference committee approved the change last week, just as the Energy Department began preparations to remove the waste. Although the action will not become final until ratified by both houses, agreement in conference is usually tantamount to passage.

Several area officials were concerned by the action. They noted it took nine years of negotiations with the Department of Energy to agree to the cleanup, which could cost \$500 million.

Not only might there be a further delay for the cleanup, but also funding may be in jeopardy, said Richard Cunningham, chairman of the St. Louis oversight committee for the

cleanup.

Jim Brown, a lobbyist in Washington for St. Louis and Lambert Field, said, "I'm assuming that we're reinventing the wheel."

The 900,000 cubic yards of contaminated earth is left over from the development of the first atomic bombs during World War II. Heaped up, the earth would be about a fourth the size of the Great Pyramid of Egypt.

In the St. Louis area, three large sites would be affected: those next to the airport, a site north of downtown and a site in north St. Louis County.

Steve McCracken, site manager for the cleanup, said he was surprised at the switch but intended to continue the work during the transition.

Under the Energy Department's schedule, the cleanup would be completed sometime around 2002 to 2004.

Sen. Pete Domenici, R-N.M., pushed to make the switch to the Corps of Engineers. He told the con-

ference committee that the Energy Department's program has been a low priority and that the cleanups were taking too long.

Missouri's senators, Christopher S. Bond and John Ashcroft, both Republicans, asked the conference committee to keep the cleanup program under the Energy Department.

But Bond said Thursday that he would work with the new situation rather than pick a fight on the Senate floor. Bond said corps officials had assured him "the corps will work with the community and all of the stakeholders to ensure a smooth transition of the program."

On Monday, the Energy Department started work on removing about 5,000 cubic yards of contaminated soil from the 22-acre site near Lambert Field. The area is being cleared to create a buffer zone between the rest of the contamination and Coldwater Creek, which runs along the edge of the site.