Bayou Sorrel project set at $20 million

By BOB ANDERSON
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Industries that dumped waste at the abandoned Bayou Sorrel hazardous waste site have agreed to a $20 million project designed to permanently prevent spread of the waste, state officials say.

A truck driver was killed by toxic gas in 1978 while unloading a tank truck of waste into one of the Bayou Sorrel pits.

The site already has been cleaned up under state supervision once, but problems were discovered by the operator after that work, and the site was put on the Superfund priority list.

Warren Byrd, the attorney who negotiated the settlement for the state attorney general’s office, said he is confident this plan will solve the problem. It includes 40 monitoring wells around the site and requires action if any well picks up a significant amount of contamination.

Although termed a cleanup, the current plan will leave waste on the site. It actually is a containment, which also employs a French drain system into which some of the waste will leach and be transported to an approved hazardous waste site.

Representatives of the attorney general’s office said they could not specify what percentage of waste would remain at the site. A clay cap will be placed on top of the site, squeezing a portion of the wastes into the drain, from which it will be pumped.

The contamination that remains on the site will be contained by the cap and slurry walls, Attorney General William Guste said at a press conference announcing the settlement.

A thick layer of natural clay lies beneath the shallow groundwater at the site, according to Byrd, who said the Plaquemine Aquifer is far below the zone of contamination. No contamination has been found off site, he said.

The 54 companies that generated the waste expect to spend $20 million on the cleanup, though they will be responsible for the project no matter what the costs are. If the companies fail to submit reports in a timely manner, there are provisions for fines of up to $2,000 a day. Missing work deadlines can bring fines of $8,000 a day and failure to perform tasks can lead to penalties of $10,000 a day, according to the attorney general’s office.

Byrd said the decree includes 30 years of monitoring the site, but monitoring may end up lasting longer.

Negotiations began in 1986, when EPA and the state threatened to sue the companies that had generated the waste, according to Guste, who said the disposal firm had gone bankrupt.

The cleanup will take about three years, officials said. The site is six miles northwest of the town of Bayou Sorrel in Iberville Parish.

A landfill, disposal cells and pits were all used at the site, which began operations in the mid-1960s and closed after the truck driver’s death.