



PRESS RELEASE

U.S. ARMY CHEMICAL MATERIALS AGENCY

Umatilla Chemical Depot

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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VX nerve agent rocket disposal begins at Umatilla

UMATILLA CHEMICAL DEPOT, Hermiston, Ore. – The Umatilla Chemical Agent Disposal Facility (UMCDF) safely destroyed its first VX M55 rocket at 12:44 p.m. today. It was the first munition destroyed in Umatilla's VX nerve agent disposal campaign, which follows the GB (sarin) disposal campaign that was completed on July 8.

"This is another landmark day for the Umatilla project," said Don Barclay, site project manager for the Army. "Our team is pleased to get started on its second agent campaign, and we'll continue working toward making our community safer."

Doug Hamrick, project general manager for Washington Group International, which built and operates the disposal plant for the Army, said the VX rocket campaign startup will be slow and deliberate.

"Safety and environmental compliance are our top priorities," he said. "So we'll increase the processing rate gradually to be sure the equipment is working properly and our employees are comfortable with the process."

UMCDF and its workers are experienced in processing M55 rockets. The disposal team safely destroyed more than 91,000 GB M55 rockets between September 8, 2004, when agent disposal operations began and August 9, 2006, when the last GB M55 rocket was destroyed. A total of 155,543 GB munitions were destroyed between September 2004 and July 2007.

VX, like GB, is a deadly nerve agent. The VX disposal campaign will include rockets, aircraft-mounted spray tanks, artillery projectiles, and land mines.

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Since the last GB munition was destroyed on July 8, a plant “changeover” from GB to VX agent processing was necessary. UMCDF employees converted and tested equipment to monitor and process VX munitions. During the past four months, plant workers also underwent extensive refresher training and practice that involved running simulated munitions through the processing lines. The changeover period also provided an opportunity to inspect all the furnaces and processing systems, and perform repairs and annual maintenance.

Hamrick said UMCDF is prepared for small rocket motor shear fires if they occur as they did during the GB rocket campaign. Fifteen of 91,442 rocket motors caught fire while the propellant section was being sheared in the Explosive Containment Room (ECR). There was no danger to the public or environment because the ECRs are designed to contain fires or explosions. But the small fires did slow down processing. In response, the plant instituted a rocket motor fire mitigation plan including a water deluge system, which eventually allowed processing to resume within hours. A study was conducted but the exact cause of the fires wasn’t determined. The rocket motor fires are believed to be related to nitroglycerin migration in the propellant as the rockets age.

The VX disposal campaign is expected to take about a year and a half to complete. After that, the plant will changeover to process HD mustard blister agent, which will be the third and final agent campaign at Umatilla.

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