

Lead Producer To Build New, Cleaner Miss. Plant

Jim Salter, Associated Press

ST. LOUIS (AP) — The nation's largest lead producer plans to build a new plant in the eastern Missouri town and promises it will be far more environmentally friendly than its existing smelter there that has been the subject of scorn by environmentalists and regulators for decades.

St. Louis-based Doe Run Co. announced the plan late Monday. It is subject to approval by the company's board of directors, with final plans and cost proposals expected to be presented to the board by the end of this year.

Doe Run announced late last year it would close the existing smelter in Herculaneum, a Mississippi River town of 3,600 residents about 30 miles south of St. Louis. The new plant would be ready for use by the time the old one is shuttered at the end of 2013, the company said.

The decision was welcome news for many in Herculaneum. In addition to 270 jobs, the smelter generates tax revenue considered vital for local government, including more than 10 percent of the local property tax for the Dunklin School District.

"The company provides a strong economic base to our community, and keeping jobs and the tax base here is important to the city and Jefferson County," Mayor Bill Haggard said.

It is the nation's only primary lead smelter, extracting from raw ore the lead used in things such as car batteries, computer screens and X-ray shields. Doe Run has previously warned that if the old smelter were closed and not replaced, the U.S. risked becoming dependent on China and other countries for its primary lead metal.

It wasn't clear if Doe Run considered other sites, but Missouri has been the nation's leading lead producer for well over a century and most of it comes from the region near Herculaneum.

Still, the smelter has always presented a quandary for Herculaneum. Residents have sued Doe Run over pollution from the plant, and the company has grappled with state regulators and the Environmental Protection Agency over its ability to contain the lead. Lead poisoning can hurt learning, IQ and memory in children, and cause cardiovascular, blood pressure and kidney problems in adults.

Over the past three decades, the EPA has cited Doe Run and fined the company many times for air pollution, lead dust in homes, and elevated levels of the metal in yards and children's blood.

Doe Run has responded by buying out 130 residential properties near the smelter and replacing the soil at more than 500 homes. Much of that property has been

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transformed into the off-limits green space.

Doe Run said the new plant would use a "contained wet chemical" process that replaces the heat-based smelting currently used.

In the new process, a chemical solution dissolves lead into a solution. An electrical charge is then applied to the solution to attract lead ions to a metal plate. The process eliminates the production of granular lead waste that has to be stored. The company said it also virtually eliminates all lead air emissions and sulfur dioxide emissions.

Kathleen Logan Smith, the executive director for the Missouri Coalition for the Environment, agreed that the new process would be a big improvement.

"It's not a panacea, but it will be an improvement," she said. "Hopefully they can start being more proactive in their environmental stewardship."

Gary Hughes, general manager of Doe Run's Primary Smelting Division, called the new plant a "world-changing opportunity."

"Having a way to support our domestic battery manufacturers and other customers with the primary lead metal they need not only protects the environment, but also protects U.S. industry," Hughes said in a statement.

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