



GWYNETH ROBERTS, JOURNAL STAR

Rally participants hold signs questioning the mitigation efforts for the hazardous waste at the AltEn facility near Mead on Monday in the Capitol rotunda.

Group wants answers on AltEn

State says it's working as quickly as it can on cleanup

CHRIS DUNKER
Lincoln Journal Star

State lawmakers and environmental advocates renewed their call to convene a special committee charged with investigating the AltEn ethanol plant, now a stockpile of tens of thousands of tons of pesticide-laden waste near Mead.

At the same time, work to cover the massive pile of wet distiller's grains and sludge produced at the plant began almost a year to the day after the companies that formerly sent seed coated in pesticides arrived at the facility to participate in the cleanup.

Both the examination of what led to the environmental crisis, as well as a look at what's ahead, were the subject of a "Stop the AltEn Cover-up" rally in the Rotunda at the state Capitol on Monday.

Sen. Carol Blood of Bellevue, who introduced several bills this year addressing AltEn, told roughly 40 attendees that Nebraskans deserved answers about how the biofuel plant was allowed to manufacture pesticide-coated seed into ethanol, as well as why the state took so long to act.

A resolution (LR159) to create the committee, introduced by Blood late in last year's legislative session, was introduced too late to get a hearing before the Executive Board, Sen. Dan Hughes of Venango said last year.

The resolution has not been

scheduled for a hearing this year, either.

"We want to protect our precious soil, our life-giving water, and the air we breathe," said Blood, who is also running for governor as a Democrat. "It's time for public discourse so we can amplify our voices here today."

AltEn was ordered to shut down Feb. 4, 2021, after regulators told the company that it could no longer pump wastewater into a damaged lagoon system on the site.

Since then, six seed industry giants — Bayer, Syngenta, Corteva, AgReliant, Beck's Superior Hybrids and WinField Solutions — that formerly sent their unused seed to AltEn have taken responsibility for the cleanup.

The seed companies' AltEn Facility Response Group and a pair of environmental con-

tractors has submitted a plan to land-apply treated wastewater on surrounding fields, and to cover nearly 100,000 tons of wet cake and sludge consolidated into a single pile.

A coordinator on the project said work that began Monday to cover the pile with Posi-Shell, a combination of cement, clay and polyester fibers used in various environmental remediation projects, was expected to continue through the week.

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 **WATCH:** The video "Bad Seed: Mead's fight against a toxic ethanol plant" by pointing your smartphone camera at the QR code and tapping on the link. **NEWSVU**

AltEn

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The Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy, through documents made publicly available, has expressed concern about the plan, but is ultimately allowing work to proceed.

In a Jan. 11 letter, Thomas Buell, the administrator of the Monitoring and Remediation Division, wrote that the department “does not see covering the wet cake as a long-term remedial action.”

The plan submitted by the AltEn Facility Response Group does not specify what maintenance will be done to ensure the wet cake pile remains covered, leaving the department concerned that a shifting or shrinking pile could cause the shell to fail.

“A compromised cover could lead to increased odors or generate potentially contaminated stormwater,” the department wrote to the response group.

And nothing in the group’s plan outlines the final actions that will be taken to



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Sen. Carol Blood speaks at a rally in the Capitol rotunda Monday concerning mitigation efforts for the hazardous waste at the AltEn facility near Mead.

Ashland who is part of a watchdog group monitoring the cleanup, said the plan in motion allows the seed companies to cover up the issue.

“They have not yet released a plan for ongoing maintenance of the shell or how they test groundwater under it for the next five to 10 years,” Mollhoff said. “The cover-up will fail all of us.”

Questions about access

state environmental department, said the agency’s authority stemmed from its charge to enforce regulations, and it was unable to give permission to non-regulatory entities.

“The AltEn facility is private property and access would be at the discretion and permission of the property owner for a third party to enter or gather material,” Macy wrote to Blood on Oct. 1.

Dr. Ali Khan, dean of

plained. AltEn no longer has any employees working at the plant.

At his weekly news conference Monday, Gov. Pete Ricketts said AltEn was not required to let researchers onto the property, nor would the state force it to do so.

“We can’t go just tell any private property owner they have to allow some third party on their property,” Ricketts said.

The governor said the state is working with the Environmental Protection Agency, which conducted air sampling last fall, and is keeping the federal agency informed of the work being done.

Ricketts said the state is also on site at AltEn three days a week doing inspections and coordinating the cleanup.

“I understand people’s frustrations — it’s not a good situation — but we’re working through it as quickly as we can,” he said.

Pledge to keep pressure on

Blood told the rally she be-

dispose of the wet cake, which is classified as a solid waste by the Department of Environment and Energy, requiring disposal in a landfill.

The ethanol plant had previously disposed of tens of thousands of tons of wet distiller's grains to Waste Connections-operated landfills near David City, Milford and Malvern, Iowa, before being cut off in 2020.

Last year, the facility response group explored options for transporting wet cake via train to incinerators around the country, but abandoned the effort to instead focus on covering the pile as a temporary solution.

The Department of Environment and Energy said it also has concerns about the undefined timeline for how long the covered pile may sit on top of the uncovered ground at AltEn, where it will still be able to leach to the water table below.

It instructed the response group to "establish a baseline of potential pesticide-contaminant concentrations in the groundwater" near the location.

There are a handful of groundwater monitoring wells located at AltEn, with measurable levels of neonicotinoid pesticides being discovered in one well downstream from the damaged lagoon system on the site.

Janece Mollhoff, a retired U.S. Army colonel from

Speakers at Monday's rally at the Capitol said among the biggest concerns they have about AltEn is the unknowns about its future.

Former Sen. Al Davis said the decaying organic matter underneath the Posi-Shell could create explosive gases as it decays and suggested the pesticide compounds could degrade into potentially more dangerous chemicals under a hot summer sun.

"Nobody knows the answer to that, but it's the scariest question of all," said Davis, who is a lobbyist for the Nebraska Sierra Club.

To answer those questions, the watchdog group urged the Legislature to pass LB1048, which Blood introduced, to appropriate \$10 million to the University of Nebraska for a long-term study on the ethanol plant's impacts on the surrounding communities and the environment.

Blood also said efforts to gain access to AltEn's facility to study the waste products and spread of the contamination have been stymied.

When the research team asks AltEn, the company defers to the Department of Environment and Energy, she said, but when the request is put to the state, the state refers the decision back to the ethanol plant.

Last fall, responding to a request from Blood, Jim Macy, the director of the

UNMC's College of Public Health, reached out to AltEn general manager Scott Tingelhoff directly March 29, 2021, offering to partner with the ethanol plant on the study, according to an email shared with the Journal Star.

"I am glad to share our scientific approach if you would also like to collaborate in some aspects of this effort," Khan wrote.

Tingelhoff responded less than 15 minutes later, asking Khan to share what he had in mind and suggest a time to discuss the research project.

Khan said his executive assistant reached out to continue the conversation, but it never went any further.

In December, responding to a question at a panel on the AltEn study hosted by the Daugherty Water for Food Global Institute, Khan said the request was met with "radio silence."

Lincoln attorney Stephen Mossman, who represents AltEn, said no formal request had been made for researchers to come onto the property until Monday afternoon, when he received a letter from Khan.

Mossman said he will coordinate with the Nebraska Attorney General's Office and the Bruning Law Group, which represents the AltEn Facility Response Group, to coordinate access for the research team.

Those groups currently control the site, he ex-

believes the state doesn't want Nebraskans to know the full extent of the pesticide contamination stemming from AltEn.

She said conversations with her colleagues in the Legislature lead her to believe many are being misled about the cleanup's progress.

"We have a lot of senators who believe things are going well and there's no more contamination," she said. "What we know is not what they're being told."

Blood and others who spoke at the rally urged Nebraskans to reach out to their state senators and push to have the AltEn-related legislation — including the resolution to create a special committee — pushed to the floor for full debate.

Joslyn Stamp, 14, of Plattsmouth, said it was important for the state to act swiftly in order to keep Nebraska a safe, healthy place for future generations.

"I think it's perfect that we all gathered here on Valentine's Day, because most of the places and people I love are right here in Nebraska," the eighth grader at Brownell Talbot College Preparatory School said. "Thank you all for being here to protect that."

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