

Power company celebrates restoration of Big Rock Point site

A BNFL Inc. project in part

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Nine years after the Big Rock Point Nuclear Power Plant near Charlevoix, Mich., stopped generating electricity, Consumers Energy says it has finished demolishing the structure and returning the woody grounds to their natural condition.

"We're extremely proud that we have met our promise to return the site to a greenfield," company spokesman Tim Petrosky said.

Hundreds of former employees and government officials planned to attend a ceremony Tuesday to declare the restoration complete.

Originally constructed for research and development by the Atomic Energy Commission, forerunner of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, Big Rock Point began generating power in 1962.

It started commercial operations three years later, generating 67 megawatts from its boiling water reactor, and became the nation's oldest operating commercial nuclear plant in 1993.

The reactor was housed in a round, aquamarine containment building perched by the edge of Lake Michigan. Motorists driving along U.S. 31 a few miles north of Charlevoix could glimpse the structure through the trees.

Although licensed to operate until 2000, Consumers shut down Big Rock Point in August 1997, saying it wasn't economically feasible to continue operations.

The plant has since been torn down. Its reactor was shipped to a low-level nuclear waste landfill in Barnwell, S.C.

But the spent fuel rods will remain on the premises inside concrete and steel casks until a national storage site for high-level radioactive waste is available. The Department of Energy plans to open such a facility at Yucca Mountain in Nevada by March 2017, despite local opposition.

Consumers Energy, the principal subsidiary of Jackson, Mich.-based CMS Energy Corp., says tests have detected only the barest trace of plant-generated radiation remaining at the Big Rock Point site. The company says the grounds are suitable for any use, including residential development, but that it hopes to sell them to the state for public recreation.

Most of the 475-acre property is heavily wooded. It includes 1.5 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline.

"It's the largest undisturbed piece of Lake Michigan frontage in this part of the state," said Tom Bailey, executive director of the Little Traverse Conservancy, which supports government acquisition of the site.

The area is culturally significant; for centuries it was a seasonal gathering spot for American Indians. It also hosts numerous endangered and threatened species, including the piping plover and plants such as Pitcher's thistle and Lake Huron tansy.

The conservancy is helping the Michigan Department of Natural Resources seek state and federal grants, but no purchase deal has been reached, Bailey said.