

GI Reluctant but Successful Pioneer in Uranium Removal

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By Steve White, Grand Island Bureau Chief

"We like to spend money like we like to see squirrels in transformers."

Who says utilities administrators like Tim Luchsinger have no sense of humor?

And as much as the guys at the power plant hate seeing a critter cause a power outage, they don't like spending millions to solve problems no one's complaining about. In this case, the problem is uranium in Grand Island's water.

Luchsinger, the utilities director said, "I don't know that uranium was on anybody's hit list necessarily around the community but it was a requirement of the EPS to take care of it and we did and it's been running well and if you don't hear about it, that's a good thing."

The plant doesn't look like much, but the \$3 million plant runs like a water softener. The difference is it removes uranium.

During a tour in July, WRT Sales VP Ron Dollar said, "You don't hear any sounds, no mechanical things moving. It's kind of like watching grass grow."

That was the promise when the plant went online six months ago.

"Hoped we would get this type of results, but would've been pleased with less," Luchsinger said.

It's been working so well, uranium is down to levels they can't detect. Luchsinger said it's been cut 40 to 50 percent.

They'd like to dial the system back, since they've learned they don't need to run it at full power.

Synthetic beads are a big cost, but may not need to be replaced as often as first thought.

Luchsinger said, "What we're trying to do is find the sweet spot, so to speak that will give us the best combination of uranium removal plus extend the life of the media."

Grand Island is a reluctant pioneer as the first city to launch a project of this scale.

Already others are visiting to see how well it's going.

Luchsinger said, "It's been a big relief to have the plant operate the way it did."

Uranium is naturally occurring along the Platte Valley, and Luchsinger said someday probably all the communities along the river will have to do something, because uranium levels have been rising.

Grand Island spent \$3 million on the plant and has a contract for \$800,000 a year to run it. The used material has to be hauled to a low-level radioactive waste site.