

Niagara



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Negotiations over wastes' removal open

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LEWISTON — A Belgian company, owner of more than 11,000 tons of radioactive residues in storage at the former Lake Ontario Ordnance Works, is supposed to remove the materials by 1983, according to a 25-year contract with the federal government.

But there is mounting evidence that the company, Union Minière du Haut Katanga of Brussels, has no intention of doing so.

Negotiations have begun at the diplomatic level, and it appears the Belgian firm would prefer not to

Closer look

claim the residues, despite an agreement with the U.S. government in 1958.

Ultimately, the radioactive materials, including 55,756 pounds of uranium oxide and almost two pounds of radium, may well end up staying in this country and perhaps right where they are now, on 191 acres of federal land off Fletcher Road.

"We are still discussing with them the disposition of this material," was the only comment from Robert Ramsey, deputy director of the waste management program for the U.S. Department of Energy.

The Belgian company was one of the major suppliers of uranium ores to the U.S. during the frenzied development of the atomic bomb in World War II.

Convinced, perhaps, of future reclamation value, the company retained rights to the low-level radioactive materials remaining in the uranium ore processing wastes.

The future economic potential never materialized since the cost of reclamation still exceeds the value of the ores. Now, the U.S. agent for the Belgian firm, African Metals Inc., seems willing to give up those rights.

"The value, in today's commerce, is not great enough to justify reclaiming it," Ramsey said.

Ramsey said the DOE may assume responsibility for the material, but would not do so without compensation from the Belgians. "Both parties, essentially, have a balance to reach," he said.

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According to federal monitoring reports recently obtained by the Niagara Gazette, the effects of radiation on the surrounding community from the Belgian residues and other radioactive materials stored at the site are minimal.

The Belgian ores currently are stored in buildings, including a huge concrete silo, which is a prominent feature on the northern Niagara County horizon. The U.S. government has shouldered all monitoring and maintenance costs since the materials arrived in Lewiston in the mid-1950s.

More than half of the radioactive materials on the former ordnance property are owned by the Belgian company.

In the past, DOE officials have talked about the possibility of shipping the Belgian materials out west, where there are several mills capable of reclaiming the usable uranium ore. Or the residues may stay in Lewiston.

On that question, Ramsey was silent, saying only that no decision had been made.

The DOE originally planned to "decommission" the ordnance property by the middle of this decade. The contaminated material would be placed in containers and shipped elsewhere, and the Lewiston property would be free of radioactive material for the first time since 1944.

But there is no "elsewhere" at this point, and the DOE may decide to leave all of the residues in Lewiston, including those now owned by the Belgians.

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