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Safer to keep waste at LOOW, report says

By LISA AUG
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LEWISTON — Leaving more than 250,000 cubic yards of radioactive material at the former Lake Ontario Ordnance Works site is safer and cheaper than storing it somewhere else, according to the U.S. Department of Energy.

But in a preliminary environmental impact statement, the Energy Department, which owns the 191-acre site on Fletcher Road, said it did not favor leaving the material in place.

The statement, however, points out the substantially higher cost and greater risks of removing and transporting the material to established disposal sites in Hanford, Wash., or Oak Ridge, Tenn.

"I just don't believe it," Lewiston Town Councilman Joan Gipp said. "They've buried radioactive waste in the past. (The LOOW site) is not a secure landfill. Whatever they do, it will impact our community."

Marvin Resnikoff, a nuclear physicist with the Sierra Club, said he believes radioactive waste should be buried in nuclear bomb test caverns in Nevada, isolated from groundwater. The Energy Department, however, continues to use those sites as a nuclear bomb testing ground.

"The material should not go into surface disposal facilities because of the hazard involved," Resnikoff said.

The Energy Department concedes that none of nine alternatives for handling the radioactive residues and wastes is perfect.

"Groundwater will eventually be unavoidably contaminated to some extent in all alternatives," the document states. "However, ... the groundwater pathway ... represents a very small risk with respect to radiological risks to the general population."

For 40 years, uranium residues from the World War II development of the atomic bomb have emitted radon gas and gamma rays to the surrounding farmland. The radiation has come from contaminated soil and water and a concrete water tower holding 4,000 cubic yards of the most radioactive material.

Two years ago, the Energy Department began cleanup work at the site, culminating this month with the transfer of the tower residues to a concrete foundation half a mile away. Over the next year or two, workers will demolish the tower, excavate contaminated soil, bury the contaminated material and cover it with clay.

"I can't see that the remedial work

they've been doing is any less dangerous than it would have been to put the material in stainless steel drums and move it," Mrs. Gipp said.

The Energy Department estimates that transporting the material to Hanford is eight to 10 times more likely to cause injury or death than leaving the material in Lewiston.

It also estimates the cost of moving the material to Hanford at about \$200 million, compared to \$3 million for putting a permanent cap on the material where it is now.

Maintaining the disposal site to prevent further contamination will cost \$43,000 to \$130,000 per year — as much as \$36 million over 200 years, according to the estimate.

The department will hold a public hearing on the LOOW site's radioactive material at 7:30 p.m. Sept. 19 at the Lewiston-Porter Senior High School auditorium on Creek Road in Lewiston. Copies of the draft statement can be reviewed at Lewiston Town Hall, 1375 Ridge Road.

The department will announce its preferred disposal option in a final impact statement in November or December and make a decision next spring.

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