60 See Cleanup of Manhattan Project Site

By THAD KOMOROWSKI

LEWISTON — The red carpet was rolled out Saturday for the public to inspect cleanup work at the former U.S. Army Lake Ontario Ordnance Works, now the Niagara Falls Storage Site.

Officials from the U.S. Department of Energy and Bechtel National of Oak Ridge, Tenn., greeted about 60 visitors during the four-hour open house and provided printed information, a photo display, a videotape and a bus tour of the site.

Radioactive materials from the Manhattan Project were stored on the site during World War II, and about six years ago the site was designated for the $41 million remedial action program.

John F. Schlatter, Bechtel public relations manager, said the site has been the No. 1 concern in the Energy Department Surplus Facilities Management Program since 1982 because of its size and levels of radon gas around the facility measured far above the limits set by the federal government.

Other sites in the program include the Linde Division of the Union Carbide Corp. and the Ashland Oil Refinery near the south Grand Island bridges in the Town of Tonawanda, and a Colonie location near Albany, he said.

"We knew there was a lot of interest in (the project)," he noted. "We wanted to answer any questions from the community."

Schlatter was among about a dozen representatives from Bechtel and the energy department on hand.

Carol and Otto Lindemann of Buffalo, who said they came to the site out of curiosity, said Bechtel has done "a nice job" here. The Lindemanns, who regularly follow environmental matters and have been to the West Valley site in Cattaraugus County, said they were satisfied with the project and tour and that their findings were what they expected from Bechtel.

"They are well-known in this field and are very respectable," he said.

Ross Giese, a geology professor at the State University of Buffalo, also commented that Bechtel is a top-notch firm. He made the trip here with Patricia Costanzo, who teaches a freshman geology course entitled "Chemical Hazards: Geologic and Man-made" at the university, as part of their research.

"I have been doing some work with sanitary landfills," he said. "The same technique — clay dikes and clay caps — is used here."

Although the study of buried radioactivity is relatively young, testing and monitoring have shown clay to be impermeable, according to Robert Atkins of the Energy Department.

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Kathy Marlette and Gerry Gorbach of Niagara Falls inspect a display at the Niagara Falls Storage Site open house.

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Don Gamble, operations manager, noted that the site first was used by the Army in World War II as a TNT plant and the dairy barn, which still stands, housed the power facility.

Local folklore has maintained the site was made to look like a farm to fool enemy bombers during the war.

Schlatter confessed he has heard the story, but he could not confirm the buildings were used as a disguise.

"But it worked," he said jokingly, "because it never got bombed."

The 191-acre Niagara site on Pletcher Road, now only a remnant of the original 7,500-acre parcel owned by the Army, became the destination for radioactive residues from the development of the atomic bomb and the early years of the nation's atomic energy program.

As a result, portions of the site became contaminated. Over the years, wind and water erosion compounded the problem. Radioactive material migrated.

Contaminated soil and other materials had to be collected; more than three miles of the drainage canal were removed; and even the 165-foot silo — once the most visible symbol of the World War II project — was torn down.

All the 255,000 cubic yards of material were reduced to a 10-acre containment area with bottom layers of natural clay and surrounded by a clay dike and cutoff walls. The area is secured with a 3-foot clay cap and 18 inches of topsoil as an interim seal that officials said would last 25 to 50 years.

About 50 wells and other sensors around the containment area allow the firm to monitor surface and subsurface trends. So far, the regular sampling has found nothing, and the reports are available to the public, Gamble said.

Vegetation has come back to the ditch, and grass grows atop the clay cap, he said. Only grass with shallow roots can be grown because longer roots could affect the cap.

In the next five to six years, the interim cap will be replaced by a long-term seal that will add another foot of clay followed by a layer of sand, 3 feet of loose stone and rock, more sand and topsoil, he said. With a much longer slope, the new cap will improve drainage and should last 200 to 1,000 years, an explanation said.

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