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Nuclear-storage site is believed safe

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WASHINGTON — The National Research Council said Monday a nuclear-storage site in Lewiston that dates from first atomic bomb project is currently safe but urged that most of the high-level nuclear waste there be removed someday.

"The high-level residues (at the Lewiston site) pose a potential long-term risk to the public, given the existing environmental conditions and future unpredictability," the Council said.

The National Research Council, a privately funded arm of the National Academy of Sciences, said the Department of Energy needs to do a better job monitoring how much material is leaking into air and ground water.

Pointing to the growing use of adjacent land for housing, the Council also said it is concerned about the potential for mixing toxic chemicals, stored nearby at a controversial Chemical Waste Management facility, with the volatile nuclear materials.

The Chemical Waste Management dump is under federal enforcement orders because of ground-water contamination.

The cost of packing up the high-level nuclear material and shipping it to permanent storage in Nevada or Washington state could cost as much as \$85 million. The remaining low-level residue should then be reburied under a permanent cap, the Council report said.

The Department of Energy, which owns the site, issued a statement saying the report would be studied carefully.

"The department is currently performing remedial action on nearly identical residues at the Fernald (Ohio)

Environmental Management Project," said Thomas Grumbly, the department's assistant secretary. "The Fernald residues are scheduled to be treated and shipped by 2004."

The Council criticized the department for its slipshod work in monitoring ground-water samples on land just outside the 190-acre preserve.

"No attempt was made to monitor toxic, non-radioactive materials such as lead," the Council said.

Jim Rauch, spokesman for the West Valley Coalition, said the Council's report "sounds like a good study, but the Department of Energy is inclined to say it is just a recommendation. (The department) has said it will not regard it as an action plan."

Rauch said the department needs to address how the storage site affects housing developments in the neighborhood, which borders the Porter town line, and the campus of Lewiston-Porter Schools.

Diane D'Arrigo, analyst for Nuclear Information Services, said the Niagara Falls Storage Site — as it is officially known — is "a radioactive lasagna," containing layers of radon, radium, three types of uranium and thorium. It takes 75,000 years for half the atoms in a sample of thorium to disintegrate, she said.

Meanwhile, some Lewiston residents Monday night said they were happy about the report.

Timothy P. Henderson, president Residents Organized for Lewiston-Porter's Environment, said "This is the first time in my knowledge that the recommendation has been made for the waste to leave Lewiston."

He was among 30 people attending a meeting with a representative from the Council in Town Hall.

Pam Milleville of The News Niagara County Bureau contributed to this report.