ENVIRONMENT

Corps plans radioactive building work

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LEWISTON — More than 40 years after activity ceased at two Lewiston buildings used in the Manhattan Project, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will start removing small portions of the buildings found to be radioactive.

Buffalo Corps District Commander Lieut. Col. Michael J. Conrad Jr. confirmed his unit will begin the cleanup within six weeks as part of a schedule of activities the U.S. Department of Energy plans to carry out at the Niagara Falls Storage Site in Lewiston.

The Corps does not yet have an exact date for the start of the project.

The Niagara Falls Storage Site is part of a larger complex used to process and store radioactive waste used to make the first atomic bomb during World War II. Located between Pletcher and Balmer roads, it is part of a 191-acre area remaining from an original 7,500-acre parcel of federal land.

In buildings 401 and 403, radioactivity detected in some ceiling beams and other isolated areas of the buildings will be removed to a facility willing to accept slightly radioactive waste.

The buildings, which were used to process non-radioactive Boron-10, will remain standing, Corps chemical-environmental engineer Judith S. Leithner said.

Responsibility for the Niagara Falls site and 20 other sites nationwide with World War II-era radioactive wastes was transferred from the U.S. DOE to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in October 1997. The Corps plans to follow the Energy Department's schedule for cleanup at the Niagara Falls Storage Site. Considering the recent transfer of responsibility, that is a difficult but realistic goal for the Buffalo Corps, Conrad said.

In addition to cleanup at buildings 401 and 403, Corps of Engineers security experts from Huntsville, Ala., will travel to Lewiston within the six weeks or so to conduct a one- to two-week security study at the Niagara Falls Storage Site.

In addition to the DOE's scheduled activities in Lewiston, the Corps is preparing to reconsider the Energy Department's 1986 plan to build a long-term containment cap on highly radioactive residues at the Niagara Falls Storage Site.

To encourage input from Lewiston and Porter-area residents, the Corps will begin a stepped-up community relations effort this spring before it begins a study of the DOE's proposal and other options for highly radioactive residues in Lewiston some time in 1999, Conrad said.

Unlike other scheduled activities for the site, the study and any long-term cleanup action at the Niagara Falls Storage Site probably won't be finished for several years, Conrad said. The study will reopen the decades-old question of what to do with the highly radioactive residue at the site.

A 1995 Academy of Sciences report said highly radioactive residues stored at the site should be moved at

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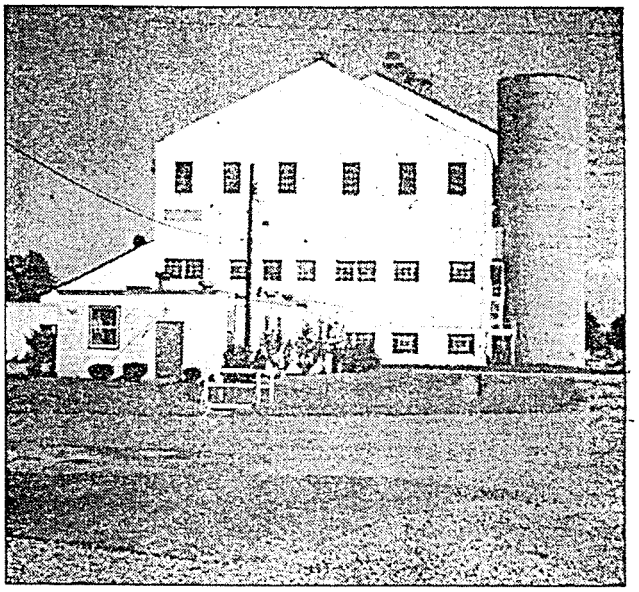

This is the west side of Building 401 at the Niagara Falls Storage Site off Pletcher Road in Lewiston. This building, constructed in the early 1940s, will be among the first to be cleaned up.

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some future date. The residues are not expected to pose a public health risk to anyone outside the facility for decades, the report said.

Among options being considered for the residue are: converting the waste to glass-like balls in a process known as vitrification; transferring the residue to another secure site in another form; or placing a "permanent" cap on the site and leaving it where it is.

The Energy Department had favored placing a long-term cap on the site's radioactive residue and leaving it where it is now, in a concrete-reinforced cellar. The long-term cap proposed by the DOE was designed to last from 300 to 1,000 years. For decades, the waste had been stored in a concrete silo at the site.

The feasibility study is expected to take more than a year, and the site probably won't be cleaned up by the DOE's target date of 2002 for cleanup of 21 radioactive dump sites nationwide, Conrad said.

The Corps expects to spend about $1.4 million on projects at the Niagara Falls Storage Site this year.