

WNY'S NUCLEAR LEGACY

by Natalie Green

It was a ten year battle with the Department of Energy to get it done right, but last weekend the first trainload of low-level radioactive waste finally left the Ashland 2 Site on River Road in Tonawanda, headed for its final resting place near Blanding, Utah, 282 miles south east of Salt Lake City.

"This is very, very good news. For the first time in 55 years radioactive material is leaving our community instead of coming into it," said Richard Tobe, chairperson of CANIT, or Coalition Against Nuclear Material in Tonawanda.

The excavated material will be shipped to a fully licensed facility owned by the International Uranium Corporation, a Utah based mining concern, which will extract uranium from the contaminated soil for reuse.

Out of 46 sites in 14 states identified by the federal government as containing radioactive waste developed during the war effort, New York State has 10, 6 of which are in Western New York. These 46 sites are covered by FUSRAP, the Formerly Used Sites Remedial Action Plan established in 1974 and funded through Congress.

Unlike with environmental damage from chemical wastes, which are covered by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, the Federal Government does not go after the owners of the sites for the costs necessary for remediation of nuclear contamination stemming from military industry in World War II.

FUSRAP was established in 1974, with a mission to identify and restore sites with low level contamination. The six sites in this area came to the attention of local residents only as recently as 1988, when the Department of Energy, under whose umbrella this touchy

issue falls, proposed a consolidation of nuclear waste from their site in Colonie, N.Y. to one large site in Tonawanda, along with consolidating the four sites already there. Citizens and local politicians were vociferously opposed to this proposal and successfully lobbied, with the help of Congressman John LaFalce, to kill the proposal.

The Ashland 2 cleanup, which will continue through September, has taken a decade to implement, and went through a number of different planning stages to get to where it is now.

Funnily enough, it is not the Department of Energy who, after years of negotiation with citizen advocate groups like CANIT, was scheduled to remediate the four low-level nuclear waste sites in Tonawanda. Instead Congress transferred responsibility for the FUSRAP program to the Army Corps of Engineers, which has impressed Tobe and Tonawanda Town Supervisor Carl Calabrese with their efficiency and thoroughness in getting the job done well and on schedule.

Calabrese quotes the Army Corps Colonel in charge of the operation as saying "If it has more radiation than a bottle of salad dressing, it's out of here."

How it got here

War is hell, and leaves its mark on generations. When the United States developed the atomic bomb in World War II, Buffalo was an important industrial town with cheap, abundant electricity and convenient access to waterways. This area was perfect, therefore, to help in the war effort when extracting a single isotope from uranium was needed to build the bomb that ended the war and decimated two large Japanese cities.

Western New York was instrumental to Department of Energy forerunners, Manhattan Engineer District and Atomic Energy Commission. What's left of African-mined ura-

nium used to build bombs is stored in Lewiston at one of the six FUSRAP sites, the Niagara Falls Storage Site. Other sites have low levels of American-mined uranium, thorium and radium. Little of the area's radioactive material, however, is highly dangerous, since the stages of bomb development in Western New York were early in the atomic process and relatively simple. The remainder of radioactive material at the 6 sites in WNY, according to FUSRAP literature, is just a bit stronger than naturally occurring radiation.

Grass roots at work

Tobe, though happy with the proceeding Ashland 2 clean-up, thinks the process should have happened sooner. The reason it didn't, Tobe says, is because CANIT and other citizens didn't want to agree to an expedited clean up without considering options.

While he stops short of saying the Department of Energy was dishonest with CANIT, Tobe admits "There were times when I thought they weren't as forthcoming as they could have been."

As an example Tobe cites the DOE's original cost estimate for transporting the radioactive waste from the Tonawanda sites at \$200 million. The activists with CANIT started doing their own research on the cost of transporting the material out of state. The answers CANIT got were vastly different from what the DOE estimated.

While the DOE implied that finding an appropriate site to accept the material would be difficult, CANIT found one after another. Western concern that was not only willing to accept the material, but were happy to have it. Dawn Mining, a mining company in Washington State, for instance, had an old uranium mine they wanted filled. The material coming out of Tonawanda, N.Y. has no higher radiation levels than the material that is already in the site Dawn Mining wanted filled. The mining company would make money for accepting the fill and use that money to improve their site. In the end, not only did CANIT find takers for their radioactive material, they found competition for it, which drove down the cost of transport.

In the end, the estimated \$200,000 clean up was really a \$19 million dollar clean-up, thanks in large part to a grass roots organization that networked, found similar communities with similar materials and discussed solutions. The Blanding, Utah site not populous, and is extremely dry. Water damage is the most common reason for leakage of nuclear or chemical waste into the environment, because water is most like to damage containment units and carry pollutants.

Tobe surmises that Congress ended up giving the program to another part of government "...in large part because they were unhappy with DOE. It took them more than 10 years to make this project work."

"The culture within the DOE," says Tobe, "is

one of constant study and work and motion but no conclusion. They didn't seem to be driven to bring this to an end."

Yet part of the reason for the delay was the very strength of the Coalition. Town Supervisor Calabrese wanted to make sure that ever part of the clean-up jibed with his waterfront master plan, and CANIT, who had actually gotten a DOE grant to hire a scientist to advise them on the technical matters at issue, were insistent on complying with stricter New York State guidelines, rather than the federal guidelines that were the only ones to which the DOE was legally bound. Still, at the insistence of the involved citizens, the Department of Energy acquiesced, and a Record of Decision, the official final agreement was signed on April 20, 1998.

In the Fiscal Year 1998 Energy and Water Appropriations Bill, signed into law on October 13, 1997, Congress transferred management of FUSRAP to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). A total of \$140 million in FY 1998 funding was provided to USACE by this legislation, to remediate the remaining 22 sites across the nation. The Buffalo District of FUSRAP, which does not handle every nuclear waste site - only those contaminated in the war effort - was funded \$35 million to handle eight sites, two of which are in Ohio.

What happens next?

FUSRAP's goal is to remediate the affected land so well that it can be redeveloped into something positive for the community.

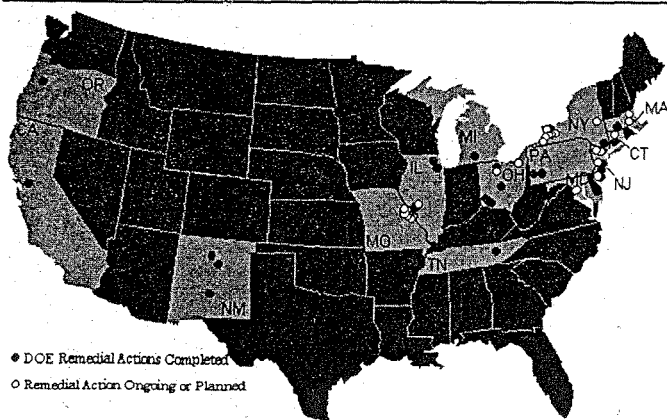
In Tonawanda, this is part of Calabrese's master plan for riverfront development, an obvious improvement to the widespread waterfront abandonment Tonawanda's riverfront has come to expect. In keeping with City of Buffalo ongoing waterfront development, Tonawanda plans to develop a strip of land on the unaffected waterfront side of River Road that is combination town park, county park and state park. The land directly in front of the Ashland and Seaway sites will be developed for light industrial and commercial purposes. "We've seen some interest from a major developer already, and that would never have happened without this clean-up," says Calabrese. Not only is it hard to get businesses interested in land known for nuclear waste, even of the mildest kind, but it's just as difficult to get banks interested in funding. Once these sites are cleaned up completely, 2002 is the estimated finish date, Calabrese expects to see the area develop quickly and well.

Indeed it is an especially pretty area, along Niagara River, peaceful and woody. The stench that has been there for years from the nearby oil refineries has diminished, and those too are being limited to storage tanks.

Who cares, it's already polluted!

This week, August 2, marks the 20th

FUSRAP—46 SITES IN 14 STATES



● DOE Remedial Actions Completed
○ Remedial Action Ongoing or Planned

LEAVING AT LAST



anniversary of President Jimmy Carter's declaration of a state of emergency for Love Canal, when 239 families were evacuated from a hazardous chemical waste dump. The environmental disaster that came to light in 1978 only added to the image of Buffalo as the "armpit of the nation."

Erie and Niagara Counties are rife with environmentally challenged areas. The city of Niagara Falls, despite a clear warning on the deed for the land they bought from Hooker Chemical for \$1, built a school and neighborhood on top of an abandoned canal, which had been filled in with 20,000 tons of hazardous waste. Inspired by the serious situation at Love Canal, New York State identified approximately 1,000 chemical waste sites in need of remediation, and fully 25% of which are clustered in Erie and Niagara.

FUSRAP covers only those sites having to do with the war effort, but these are not the only sites in Western New York containing radioactive waste. The other major nuclear waste producers are utility companies, and less ominously, hospitals using radioactive materials for medicinal purposes.

The FUSRAP history is a nuclear waste success story, which, it would seem, is an obvious contradiction in terms.

But there are bigger waste sites to fry, West Valley being the nearest and next. One dire project at a time, as with Love Canal 20 years ago, the involvement of concerned citizens determined to make things better can work. No one else will care if it's polluted unless we care that it is.

Informational meeting concerning clean up for Tonawanda site to be held August 5th at the Phillip Sheridan Building, Rm 122, 3200 Elmwood Ave., Kenmore. Call Arleen Kreusch Public Affairs Specialist for FUSRAP for more information: (716) 879-4438 **BB**

FUSRAP SITES IN WNY

Bliss and Laughlin Steel, Buffalo, NY

The former Bliss & Laughlin Steel facility is located in Lackawanna, NY. This site was used by the Bliss & Laughlin Steel Company to machine and straighten uranium rods during September and October of 1952. The site is currently owned by the Niagara Cold Drawn Company.

Niagara Falls Storage Site, Lewiston, NY

The Niagara Falls Storage Site (NFSS) is located in Lewiston, NY. Radioactive residues and wastes from uranium ore processing were transported to the NFSS for storage from 1944 until the late 1950s. These residues and wastes are currently stored in an earthen containment structure on the site.

Tonawanda Sites, Tonawanda, NY

Linde Site

The Linde Site is located in Tonawanda, NY. From 1942 to 1946, the former Linde Air Products Division of Union Carbide processed uranium ores at this location under contract to the Manhattan Engineer District (MED). The site is currently owned by Praxair Inc.

Ashland 1 Site

Ashland 1 is located in Tonawanda, NY, along the Niagara River. From 1944 to 1946, approximately 8,000 tons of low-grade uranium ore tailings were stored at what is now the Ashland 1 Site. The site is currently owned by Ashland Chemical Co.

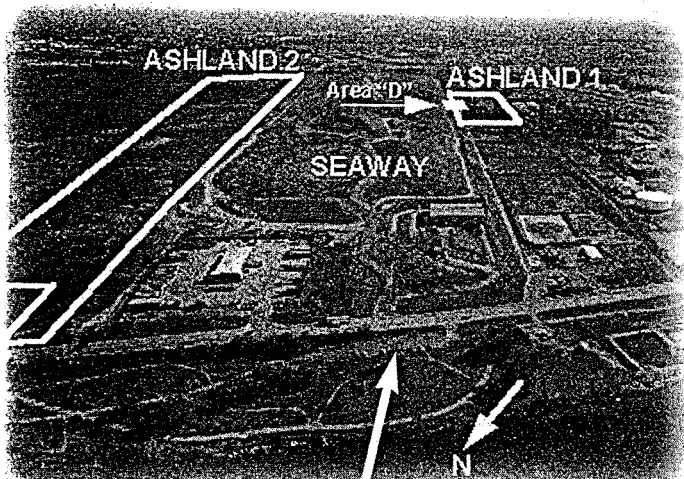
Ashland 2 Site

Ashland 2 is located in Tonawanda, NY, along the Niagara River. Between 1974 and 1982, approximately 6,000 cubic yards of soil containing low-level radioactive residues was transferred from the Ashland 1 Site to an area at Ashland 2. The site is currently owned by Ashland Chemical Co.

Seaway Site

Seaway Industrial Park is located in Tonawanda, NY, along the Niagara River. Between 1974 and 1982, the Seaway Site was contaminated during the transfer of soil containing low-level radioactive residues from the Ashland 1 Site to the Ashland 2 Site. The site is currently owned by the Seaway Industrial Park Development Company, Inc.

Source: FUSRAP Buffalo Office Web site:
www.ncb.usace.army.mil

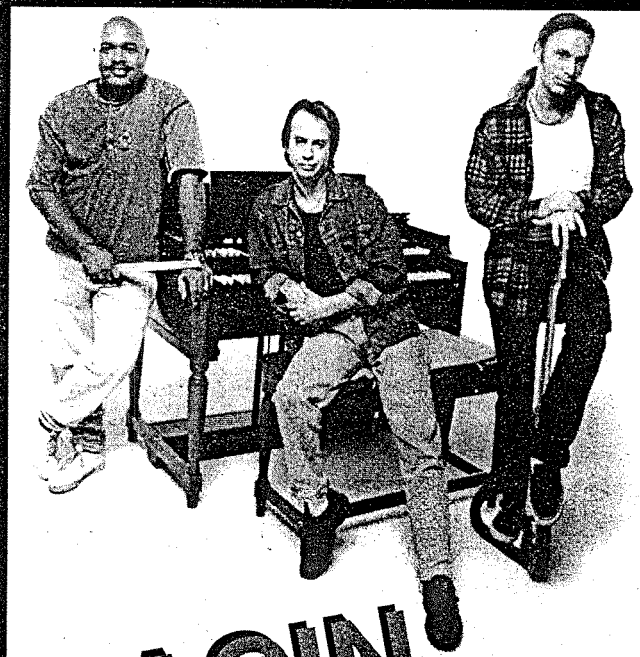


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