Cleanup of waste site may begin

By Matthew Winterhalter and Scott Leffler
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LEWISTON — The Lake Ontario Ordinance Works (LOOW) site, only a mile from the Lewiston-Porter Schools complex, may be close to being cleaned up.

The Army Corps of Engineers has prepared an Engineering Evaluation/Cost Analysis Report providing for "interim removal action," and a public comment period on the report will begin Monday and run through Oct. 10.

The corps announced the comment period in a press release Friday.

A public meeting will be held "upon timely request," the corps said, and written comments on the report can be submitted to the corps, Public Information Center, 1776 Niagara St., Buffalo, NY 14207-3199.

Written comments must be postmarked by Oct. 10.

The LOOW site is the basement of a demolished silo, and it contains a mixture of radioactive wastes from various plants in the United States.

The 7,500-acre site at Pletcher and Harold roads has been an ongoing issue in Lewiston, according to Timothy Henderson, president of ROLE (Residents Organized for Lewiston-Porter's Environment.)

The site contains some of the remnants of the Manhattan Project, including waste from the former Simonds Saw and Steel Co. in Lockport. The radioactive waste was sent to Lewiston in the 1940s and was stored in a silo at the site, according to Henderson.

"Some of it was simply dumped on the ground," he said.

The site is currently managed by the corps, which relieved the Department of Energy of the duties in 1988, according to Arlene K. Kreusch, contact public affairs specialist for the corps in Buffalo.

She said 2,500 acres of the site are occupied by the corps. "The rest is a buffer zone."

Henderson said DOE assured residents of the area and school district that the site was safe, the radioactivity of its contents "low-level" and not harmful.

The silo itself was torn down in 1983, because it was leaking. The substances contained in it were mixed with water, "slurried" through fire hoses and pumped into the silo's basement remains. Now different hazardous and radioactive materials have mixed together, Henderson said.

The DOE, in doing what it did, unwittingly increased the amount of the hazardous material, he said.

"They increased the volume of the material by probably tenfold. ... The stuff in the building is like a radioactive chowder."

In the early 1990s, DOE wanted to install a a clay cap and wash its hands of the site, according to Henderson.

The public was concerned, however, and so Rep. John J. LaFalce, D-Tonawanda, commissioned the National Academy of Sciences for an independent study of the site.

Henderson said, "To (LaFalce's) credit, he held a lot of public meetings and brought in some key people from Washington. He's the one who got the ball rolling as far as the in-depth study."

Gary Luczak, a spokesman for LaFalce, said, "We ... were interested in remediating the LOOW site."

Henderson said that after about three years, the National Academy of Sciences came back with a finding that the materials were too hazardous and needed to be moved. "Their recommendation was that for long-term storage, the materials should be taken to a more remote location, like a desert."

Henderson said that during the 1950s, some of the waste from Lewiston was shipped to Fernald, Ohio, where it was processed into something similar to glass marbles and shipped to Nevada because it was considered high-level waste.

"This was the same waste that was in Lewiston, that's still in Lewiston, and that's the problem that people had," he said. "If it was high-level waste in Ohio, why wasn't it treated as such in Lewiston?"

"It (LOOW) is probably the most studied site in the country. There are volumes of information on what's there and where it came from. There's been enough studies done."

The corps said Friday that its Administrative Record File for the former LOOW site has been established in the Lewiston Public Library, 305 S. Eighth St., Lewiston; the Youngstown Free Library, 240 Lockport St., Youngstown; and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Public Information Center, 1776 Niagara St., Buffalo. The file includes the Engineering Evaluation/Cost Analysis report and preferred alternative for cleaning the site, which is excavation of "drums, containers and debris from the drum trench and trash pit, and disposal of excavated materials at legally permitted treatment, storage or disposal facilities."