

CLEANING UP OUR HISTORY



Years of work still
needed to fix the
environmental
mess at the LOOW

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Residents should expect to wait at least a decade before the environmental contamination caused by chemicals and radioactive materials dumped in the ground in northwest Niagara County gets removed by the federal government who put it there in the first place.

But for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the federal agency spearheading the remediation process, actually cleaning up the mess includes battling history's theft of available information, as well as the lack of surety of the federal budget process.

"We're in the process now where we're defining the problem," said William Kowalewski, the Corps' project manager for the Lake Ontario Ordnance Works.

Once the Corps completes its investigative work — a process which has gone on for years and is close to completion — then come the big decisions, like how to actually do the cleanup and whether or not to move some of the most dangerous wastes.

However, exactly when those decisions may be made depends on the level of funding in the federal budget.

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Kowalewski believes the Army Corps has compiled as much information as is available on the history of activities at the LOOW site, acknowledging the cleanup process has been made more difficult because of an incomplete history available for the site.

Add to that the location is near the northeast's only active hazardous waste site, CWM Chemical Services, which "just adds several dimensions," Kowalewski said.

The historical information has been used and will continue to be used to develop the cleanup plans, which still won't be finalized for a few years, he said.

An Aug. 2005 estimate on the total cleanup costs of the LOOW site's chemical contami-

nation was pegged at \$27 million, with an average of about \$1 million to \$2 million arriving each year. Figures for the past several years put that figure near \$1 million and even less.

More than 2,700 properties across the United States fall under the Army Corps' cleanup of former Defense Department sites. The estimate on how much it would cost to cleanup all the sites — \$19 billion.

The budget process is so meticulous for Kowalewski's team, it comes down to earmarking 15-minute increments of work among a more than 20-person staff.

Judith Leithner, project manager for the cleanup of the Niagara Falls Storage Site, shares a team of engineers, chemical experts, health physicists and other experts with Kowalewski.

While project managers formulate funding requests hoping for more, actual monetary dis-

bursements are made from above and take into consideration the priority of cleanup at sites across the country.

"We don't always get what we want," Leithner said.

For many in the community, the most critical aspect of the cleanup is the 10-acre interim waste containment structure, which holds some of the most dangerous material ever on the LOOW and NFSS. Leithner assured the public that even though final cleanup money may not have arrived yet, there is still work being done to watch the integrity of the waste structure, as some worry about parts of the waste possibly entering area groundwater.

"We're taking tests all the time to make sure nothing in the cell is moving," Leithner said.

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LOOW ROUNDUP

Timeline of cleanup

■ **OCTOBER 1997:** U.S. Army Corps of Engineers take over cleanup of Niagara Falls Storage Site from U.S. Department of Energy under the FUSRAP program.

■ **NOVEMBER 1999:** Work plans for Remedial Investigation approved for NFSS.

■ **NOVEMBER 1999 TO JANUARY 2000:** Phase one of investigation field work performed on NFSS.

■ **AUGUST 2000 TO OCTOBER 2000:** Phase two of investigation field work performed on NFSS.

■ **MAY 2001 TO OCTOBER 2003:** Phase three of investigation field work performed on NFSS.

■ **SEPTEMBER 2002:** Field work of Rochester Burial Site performed on NFSS.

■ **JULY 2007*:** Completion of Remedial Investigation Report for NFSS.

■ **DECEMBER 2007*:** Completion of Remedial Investigation Report for LOOW site.

■ **2008*:** Completion of proposed plan for cleanup of NFSS.

■ **2010*:** Completion of proposed plan for cleanup of LOOW site.

■ **2011*:** Start of actual cleanup work on NFSS.

■ **2012*:** Start of actual cleanup work on LOOW site.

■ **2014*:** Completion of cleanup work on LOOW site.

■ **2015*:** Completion of cleanup work on NFSS.

■ **2016*:** Site closeout for both the NFSS and the entire LOOW.

* Projected based on expected funding levels.

Source: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

The players

■ **U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS:** Responsible for the cleanup of Lake Ontario Ordnance Works and Niagara Falls Storage Site under two federal programs, the Defense Environmental Restoration Program for Formerly Used Defense Sites (DERP-FUDS) and the Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program (FUSRAP). Under DERP-FUDS, the Army Corps is charged with cleaning up sites contaminated by Department of Defense activity. Under FUSRAP, the Corps works to remediate sites involved in the production of nuclear materials.

■ **LOCAL LANDOWNERS:** Parties which own a part of the original 7,500 acres of the LOOW include Lewiston-Porter School District, CWM Chemical Services, the towns of Lewiston and Porter, Occidental, Modern and many private landowners.

■ **RESTORATION ADVISORY BOARD:** The public-process arm of the Corps' cleanup. The group has

seven committees, including its lead Steering Committee. The position of RAB chair is currently vacant.

Site histories

Lake Ontario Ordnance Works

■ **JAN. 5, 1942:** Federal government announces it will begin TNT production facilities in towns of Lewiston and Porter.

■ **JULY 1943:** TNT production halts due to unanticipated overproduction at other U.S. plants.

■ **1950S TO 1980S:** Parts of site used to produce high energy rocket fuel, store radioactive materials.

Niagara Falls Storage Site (part of the LOOW)

■ **EARLY- TO MID-1940s:** About 1,500 acres of LOOW site transferred to Manhattan Engineering District, which was a precursor to the U.S. Department of Energy.

■ **1951:** The University of Rochester establishes site to bury animal carcasses that underwent radiological research.

■ **EARLY 1980s:** Waste from site, including from infamous silo, consolidated.

■ **TODAY:** The current 191 acres on the NFSS includes a 10-acre interim waste containment structure which holds the radioactive waste.

Source: Niagara Gazette Archives