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Panel criticizes report of site's risk

Contamination study is called 'meaningless'

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A review of risks posed by contamination at a former federal weapons site in Lewiston and Porter has been called "meaningless" and incomplete by a volunteer panel of area residents with technical expertise in the issues.

The Army Corps of Engineers ignored evidence of radiological contamination when it characterized potential dangers at the former Lake Ontario Ordnance Works site, according to the LOOW Restoration Advisory Board.

Federal regulators considered only chemical contamination in their risk assessments, the results of which were the topic of a public meeting the corps hosted in Lewiston on Sept. 16.

"Estimating the risk from only chemical exposure . . . is meaningless," the board said in a statement.

The agency's response to the board's analysis: It is not allowed to study possible radiological contamination on parts of the ordnance works site currently or formerly used or controlled by the Department of Energy, or the former Manhattan Engineering District or the Atomic Energy Commission.

Corps representatives at September's public meeting said their analysis was very conservative and there was "no current exposure to the community at large."

The corps studied "the most contaminated areas" and assumed the exposure would occur without any protections in place, said Liza Finley, a risk assessor with the corps' Baltimore District.

Only trespassers onto certain areas of the property would be at any risk, Finley said.

The corps concluded that of 10 areas where data were analyzed, half had potential human health hazards, while seven of the 10 had negligible or potential risks to plant or animal life.

Those assurances have failed to sway the advisory board members.

The board, in its critique, highlighted one area of the ordnance works site analyzed by the corps that was once part

of the facility's waste water treatment plant.

The area, known as the "vicinity shops," is now owned by the Town of Lewiston. It abuts the northwest corner of the Niagara Falls Storage Site, a 191-acre parcel that contains a 10-acre cell built in the 1980s to hold radiological waste.

Regulators reviewed only chemical contamination in the "shops" area, according to the advisory board.

Like the storage site, a secure facility also being studied by regulators, the "shops" area served some of the same purposes — it was used to store wastes from the nuclear reactor reprocessing at the Knolls Atomic Power Laboratory, located near Schenectady, the advisory board said.

Ground scans have identified high levels of radioactive cesium in the area, a material unique to previous operations at Knolls, and radiological contamination has also been found in the groundwater near the northwest corner of the Niagara Falls Storage Site, which sits behind a wire fence and is subject to regular monitoring.

The town-owned site is not subject to the same oversight.

The corps is not permitted to assess the town's property because it is controlled by the Department of Energy, corps spokesman Bruce I. Sanders said in an e-mail.

Corps officials have plans to conduct further review of the groundwater contamination, and a Department of Energy representative is scheduled to attend a December public meeting, Sanders said.

The five areas the corps said posed potential risk to human health on the former ordnance works site are located in the CWM Chemical Services facility, an operating hazardous waste landfill.

The 7,500-acre former ordnance works site was purchased by the federal government in the early 1940s to build an explosives plant manufacturing trinitrotoluene, or TNT. It had other uses once the TNT plant closed nine months after it opened.

Corps representatives stripped the board of its "official status," a move board members have been fighting, with the assistance of the county and other municipal governments, since early 2008.

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