

LOOW Site Debated November 20, 2013

By Timothy Chipp timothy.chipp@niagara-gazette.com Niagara Gazette http://www.niagara-gazette.com/local/x356558453/LOOW-site-debated

Niagara Gazette — Disputed for years has been the stability — or perceived lack thereof — of the interim waste containment structure of the Niagara Falls Storage Site in Lewiston.

But new data released by the Army Corps of Engineers Buffalo office in October, presented Wednesday to members of the Lake Ontario Ordnance Works Community Action Council, seems to shut down any lingering thoughts that the structure - a buried and capped radioactive materials dump north of Pletcher Road in Lewiston - is leaking uranium into the ground and water around it.

"We investigated known areas of past storage of radioactive materials outside the IWCS," Army Corps Health Physicist Neil Miller said. "We had aerial photos, first-hand videos of the time. We used it to investigate the areas where drums were stored and found high levels of uranium. This isn't related to the IWCS ... which is performing as it should be."

One of the most pertinent examples Miller cited in his presentation comes from a shallow well drilled east of the IWCS, which received the nickname OW11B for reference. During a remedial investigation done about a decade ago, he said, the location showed contamination levels practically off the charts at around 700 micrograms per liter.

By comparison, the accepted concentration for drinking water is 30 micrograms of uranium per liter in the United States.

Last autumn, the corps retested the soil around its known contamination areas, including OW11B, by drilling 17 new wells – four of which surround OW11B covering each direction – and retesting what they excavated. Miller said not only was the trouble spot at the same elevated figure, three of the four new wells tested higher than the drinking water standard.

The only one that didn't exceed 30 micrograms was west of OW11B, which sits directly between the hotspot and the in-question IWCS. Miller said if the IWCS was leaking, the situation would certainly not be what the results are showing.

"That's a really telling piece of information," he said. "The well is between the IWCS and OW11B. We see levels equal on the eastern side of the original well. But the western one is not elevated."

Studying the effectiveness of the IWCS, storing many materials used in the creation of the atomic bombs among others, and its viability for long-term use has been the chief mission of the Army Corps since assuming control of the site under a federal program.

Just one part, studying the rest of the NFSS not in the interim structure, this latest study also examined soil and groundwater samples from areas directly south of the IWCS, which has historically shown high radioactivity levels.

The contamination, Miller said, appears to have come from previous handling and storage methods in the area, similar to OW11B.

He said video taken of employees disassembling a building at that location, which was deemed radioactive at the time and buried in the IWCS mound, was used to determine testing points there, as well.

As for why that area wasn't included in the IWCS, despite a building being only feet away from the mound, Miller said he doesn't know.

"We don't know why they didn't include that building when they created the IWCS, why they made the border where it is," Miller said.

Miller said all 17 of the new wells were incorporated into the environmental protection plan and will continue to be tested twice per year. A copy of the entire presentation is expected to be available on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' website Thursday, at www.lrb.usace.army.mil.

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