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By JOHN F. BONFATTI

Radiation exposure site list raises questions

News Staff Reporter

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Bill Le Van walked around with a cigar dangling from his mouth but never lit it, according to his widow. In fact, as long as Dorothy Le Van knew him - and they were married 50 years - she never saw him smoke.

Yet he died of lung cancer last July. And he also had skin cancer, the extent of which stunned his doctors.

"Something did it to him, I'll tell you that much," Le Van said Friday.

She suspects her late husband's illness might have been related to his employment at the defunct Simonds Saw and Steel Co. in Lockport, where the government acknowledged workers were exposed to dangerous levels of radiation in the 1940s and 1950s.

Now, former workers at Simonds - or their survivors - and 316 other sites around the country where private contractors did nuclear weapons work for the government might be eligible for compensation.

The compensation could be substantial, a lump sum of \$150,000 or compensation for lost wages, as well as reimbursement for medical expenses. An estimated 600,000 people worked at the plants.

Simonds is one of five Niagara County sites named by Department of Energy Secretary Bill Richardson on Thursday after department staff reviewed 60 years of records.

The other four are: Titanium Alloys Manufacturing, Hooker Electrochemical and Electro Metallurgical, all in Niagara Falls; and the Lake Ontario Ordnance Works in the towns of Lewiston and Porter.

Erie County landed seven sites on the list: Utica St. Warehouse, Linde Air Products and Bliss & Laughlin Steel, all in Buffalo; Seaway Industrial Park, Linde Ceramics Plant and Ashland Oil, all in Tonawanda; and Bethlehem Steel in Lackawanna.

The other Western New York site on the list was the West Valley Demonstration Project in Cattaraugus County.

Several former Simonds workers or their survivors contacted Friday said they weren't sure whether they would start the process of seeking compensation.

"I really don't know," said Claude Bullard, 73, who worked at Simonds from 1948 until 1982. Bullard said he and some of his children may have medical conditions related to radiation, although he didn't provide specific details. "I'm going to collect as much information as I can."

Burton Stamp Sr., 67, of Medina, said he had asthma before he started working for Simonds in 1953 but wonders whether sucking up radioactive dust might have exacerbated his condition.

He indicated that he wouldn't pursue the compensation, but he said he knew "a lot of guys that worked on the mill (who) just passed away this past year around Thanksgiving."

Ed Cook said he worked in the 16-inch bar mill where radioactive uranium and thorium were milled for the government after World War II. He's 85, has shortness of breath and has trouble walking.

He believes those problems are more a function of age than his previous employment, although "I know there are a group of people who claim they are affected by it."

One former Simonds worker who said he will pursue compensation is Paul Stoddard, 65, of Gasport.

Stoddard said he's had a couple of lumps removed from his body, although doctors told him they were noncancerous. "I'm going to go after them," he said. "I think I deserve something."

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Stoddard said he's upset because he was never told that the material he was working on was dangerous. "They just said everything was all right," he said.

Le Van said she's not sure what she will do. She can't clearly recall when her husband worked for Simonds and where he worked in the plant.

That's not necessarily a problem, according to Pete Turcic of the U.S. Department of Labor, which will administer the compensation program.

Turcic said those who believe they may be eligible should call a toll-free number, (877) 447-9756, and they will be interviewed by staff in the Department of Energy's Worker Advocacy Office.

Department of Energy spokesman Jeff Sherwood asked callers to be patient. "The hotlines are overwhelmed," he said.

Workers will search government records to determine when and where a potentially affected worker was employed.

"If they needed to have a dose reconstructed, the Department of Health and Human Services is developing a procedure to reconstruct those doses," he said. "Based on that dosage, a determination would be made as to whether that cancer was likely caused by radiation exposure, and the Department of Labor would make a determination on benefits."

It will be at least until July before claims begin to be processed, Turcic said.

Dan Guttman, a Washington lawyer who headed up the President's Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Activities, said the framework and procedures for filing claims are still being worked out.

"The money should be there if you're sick," he said. "There is an administrative lag because there is no structure. At this point, you're sending your claim into a black hole because people haven't been appointed."

Guttman called the government's compensation attempt "remarkable stuff. It's a credit to the country that we look back and do these things."