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Corps of Engineers to add Simonds site to cleanup plan

By Scott Leffler

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The Army Corps of Engineers plans to add the former Simonds Saw and Steel Co. plant site in Lockport to its clean-up program, a corps spokeswoman in Washington said Friday.

Candy Walters, a public affairs specialist, said the Department of Energy, which is responsible for investigating nuclear waste sites, has asked the corps to add the contaminated 9.1-acre Simonds site, plus two other sites, to its Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program.

She said, "We do anticipate adding those three sites that have been recommended by the Department of Energy."

She could not give a schedule for when the take-over is planned or when the property will be cleaned up.

The land was last owned by Guterl Steel, which declared bankruptcy in 1982, and county property records indicate that the 9.1 acres remains in Guterl's hands, through bankruptcy trustee Stanley Makoroff of Pittsburgh. Makoroff could not be reached for comment Friday. The parcel has an assessed value of \$150, county records show.

The Simonds site was cast into the national spotlight Wednesday when USA Today began a series of articles focusing on government contract work at approximately 100 plants nationwide during the 1940s and 1950s.

Documents and interviews with some of the workers led USA Today to conclude that the government and plant officials misled workers by assuring them they would be safe. Workers

were handling radioactive substances, sometimes without knowing it.

At Simonds, 25 million to 35 million pounds of uranium and 30,000 to 40,000 pounds of thorium were rolled into billets between 1948 and 1956.

Ownership of the plant changed in 1978, and Guterl closed the mill in 1983.

Dr. Arjun Makhijani, president of a research group that conducted a study for USA Today, said, "Working conditions (between 1948 and 1956) were appalling. ... Radiation protection standards were routinely violated."

The report also said, "There is ample evidence that the plant premises became seriously contaminated during processing of radioactive materials."

Various sources have said they do not know the present level of radioactivity or the extent of contamination at the site. Edmund Sullivan, coordinator of the county brownfields project, said Thursday that the plant site "has problems that are bigger than the (county) brownfields program."

Gary Luczak, a spokesman for Rep. John J. LaFalce, D-Tonawanda, said, "When the corps gets the official notification from the DOE, they will do a site assessment. They will come in and do an evaluation. Then they have to make a determination as to what the next step will be."

Luczak said, "The Department of Environmental Conservation was involved, as was the Environmental Protection Agency, and now we've got the Army Corps of Engineers. The bottom line here is that obviously we have been and will be follow-

ing the progress on the former Simonds site."

Walters said the corps' remedial action program, which was initially set up in 1974 by the former Atomic Energy Commission, uses federal funds to clean up radioactive sites.

In 1977, the program was given to the DOE, which is still responsible for looking at sites and recommending whether they should become part of the remediation program.

DOE also was responsible for the actual clean-up until 1998, when that work fell to the corps.

At that time, a total of 21 sites were slated for clean-up. Since then, Walters said, three have been remediated, and so three new sites, including Simonds, are expected to be added.

The corps has not inspected the site and has no figures on cost or how long the work will last, Walters said. Also, the corps does know the current radiation level at the site.

The corps already maintains one radioactive waste site in Niagara County, the 7,500-acre Lake Ontario Ordnance Works site in Lewiston. That site contains waste from the Manhattan Project.

Meanwhile, State Sen. George D. Maziarz, R-North Tonawanda, said Friday that he has not been able to get in contact with state officials to determine what they can do at the Simonds site.

Maziarz said that he wanted talk to officials at the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

"My first objective is going to be to find out exactly what responsibility the state of New York has and what we can do to assist the city and the former employees," he said Thursday.