

Simonds study may point to Feds

RESPONSIBILITY:

If the government is to blame for contaminants, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will clean up the site.

By Scott Leffler

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LOCKPORT — The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is hoping to have results from a preliminary assessment of the former Simonds Saw and Steel Co. ready for the public by early next year.

Arleen Kreusch, a contract public affairs specialist for the Corps, said Thursday that the Corps has begun the preliminary assessment of hazardous materials at the defunct steel mill, which produced uranium and thorium rods from the late 1940s to mid-1950s.

Kreusch said the Corps will conduct a thorough review of available documentation on the site and talk to former employees to determine whether the government is to blame for any contaminants at the site. If that's the case, the Corps will then further investigate and clean up the site.

According to a report by the Institute for Energy and Environmental research, the federal government contracted between 25 million and 35 million pounds of uranium to be rolled at Simonds between 1948 and 1956. Simonds also rolled 30,000 to 40,000 pounds of thorium metal during that same span, the report states.

Workers of the former plant, "were certainly exposed to radiation," during the time, the report says, adding, "There is ample evidence that the plant premises became seriously contaminated during processing of radioactive materials. For

instance, even air in the lunch areas was measured to have contamination far above allowable limits of contamination."

A second report was done in 1999, well after the plant had gone out of business, by Timothy J. Viktus, project manager for the Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education in Oak Ridge, Tenn. Viktus' report, which was prepared for the property's bankruptcy trustee in Pittsburgh, said the radiation level at the site was very low.

"The biggest hazard at that site is the dilapidated buildings," Viktus said.

He said pilots would endure more radiation in a day than someone who spent a day inside one of the contaminated Simonds buildings. Viktus said he tested the buildings, air and soil at the site. Readings for radioactivity from uranium and thorium came back positive, but not in exceedingly high levels.