Guterl -S

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Blooms of fall

Chrysanthemums bring a dash of color to browning autumn landscapes, ***Gardeners Digest, Page A12***

WEATHER

Today's High 55
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Study of Simonds initiated by corps

By Scott Leffler
Lockport Journal

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers hopes to have a preliminary assessment of the former Simonds Saw and Steel Co. ready for release by early next year.

Arleen Kreusch, a public affairs specialist for the corps, said Thursday that the corps has begun a 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 plant employees to determine whether the government is to blame for any contaminants at the site.

If that's the case, the corps will further investigate and then clean up the site. If at any time the analysis of available information determines that there is a threat to human health, welfare and the environment, a removal action can be initiated, the corps said.

Kreusch said, "A letter received by the corps from the Department of Energy states that the former MED and the former AEC used the former Guterl Specialty Steel Site for atomic energy defense activities from 1948 to 1956."

According to a 1999 report by the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research in Takoma Park, Md., the federal government contracted between 25 and 35 million pounds of uranium to be rolled at Simonds

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Simonds: Engineers will temporarily manage site

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between 1948 and 1956. Simonds also rolled 30,000 to 40,000 pounds of thorium metal during that same period, the report states.

Arjun Makhijani, president of IEER, said, "There is ample evidence that the plant premises became seriously contaminated during processing of radioactive materials."

Also in 1999, the Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education in Oak Ridge, Tenn., prepared a report that concluded the radiation level at the site is very low now.

Timothy J. Viktus, project manager at the institute, said, "The biggest hazard at that site is the dilapidated buildings."

He explained that pilots would be exposed to 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. "Are they screaming hot? No," he said.

Makhijani said caution must be taken in cleaning up the site. "Sometimes you can wreck the environment trying to scoop up all the dirt, and expose workers without reaping any benefit."

In a letter written to Lt. Gen. Joe N. Ballard of the Army Corps, Congressman John J. LaFalce, D-Tonawanda, noted that recent reports have stated that the radiation levels were not high and said he had heard that moving the contaminant may be more hazardous.

LaFalce asked Ballard for the facts on those issues.

He also said, "I am pleased that the Buffalo District Corps of Engineers has been assigned jurisdiction of the Guterl site. I look forward to working closely with the Buffalo District to ensure that immediate action is taken to assess the site, and, if warranted, include the site in the FUSRAP for prompt and thorough remediation."

FUSRAP is an acronym for Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program.

Candy Walters, public affairs specialist for the corps in Washington, D.C., explained that the corps will take over temporary management of the property only until it is remediated.

"We don't take ownership of any property. All we do is clean it up," Walters said.

The property is currently held by Stanley Makaroff, a bankruptcy trustee in Pittsburgh. It was Makaroff who commissioned the Oak Ridge Institute report.

Walters explained that FUSRAP utilizes federal funds in order to clean up former nuclear sites so that they can be used again.

She said, "The FUSRAP program was established in 1974 by the Atomic Energy Commission, and the program was designed to look at these sites to see if they need to be cleaned up."

In 1977, the program was given to the Department of Energy, which is still responsible for looking at sites and recommending their inclusion or exclusion in the FUSRAP program.

When the corps took responsibility of the FUSRAP program in 1998, there were 21 sites on the list for cleanup. Since that time, Walters said, three of the sites have been remediated.

Officially now, there are 18 sites in the program, but that number is expected to go back up to 21 shortly, Walters said, although she did not have a timetable for that action.

The Corps Website states, "Most sites that became contaminated during the early atomic energy program were cleaned up under the guidelines in effect at the time. Because in most cases, those cleanup guidelines were not as strict as today's, trace amounts of radioactive materials remained at some of the sites. Over the years, contamination was spread to other locations, either by demolition of buildings, intentional movement of materials or by natural process."

Kreusch said that because the corps has not inspected the Simonds site, it has no idea how much the cleanup will cost.