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NIAGARA COUNTY

LOCKPORT

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LOCKPORT - A former foundry that made radioactive uranium fuel rods for the federal government's nuclear weapons program between 1948 and 1956 will be investigated by the Buffalo District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as a possible threat to health and the environment.

The former Guterl Specialty Steel plant will be the subject of a public meeting at 7 p.m. today in Cafeteria 170 in Lockport Senior High School, 250 Lincoln Ave.

Between 100 and 200 people are expected to be there, said the corps' contract public affairs specialist, Arleen K. Kreusch.

The nine-acre property at Ohio and Crosby streets will be included in the federal government's Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program, initiated in 1974 to identify, investigate and clean up sites nationwide that were part of the country's early atomic energy program.

"The first step in evaluating the site will be to review available information to determine the need for further investigation to ensure the protection of human health, welfare and the environment," Kreusch said.

The corps' preliminary assessment report will be released in the spring, she said.

The property was known as Simonds Saw and Steel Co. when it was used in the U.S. government's top-secret atomic bomb project. Simonds was one of hundreds of private companies nationwide, including many in Niagara County and Western New York, contracted to process nuclear weapons material.

Up to 35 million pounds of uranium and 40,000 pounds of thorium were processed on the site and rolled into fuel rods for the government's plutonium-producing nuclear reactors, according to government records.

All the uranium and thorium metals processed at Simonds Saw and Steel were created in Niagara Falls at Union Carbide's electrometallurgical division on 47th Street near Buffalo Avenue, said

environmentalist Louis H. Ricciuti, citing U.S. Department of Energy records.

Surviving relatives of former plant workers have formed a group called C-CANE, or Citizens Campaign Against Nuclear Exposure, which is collecting signatures online from survivors, past workers and the public fighting for research and remediation in the nuclear weapons waste field, said Ricciuti, a Niagara environmentalist who is studying local involvement in the Manhattan Project.

The Lockport site was one of hundreds detailed in a USA Today report Sept. 6, "Poisoned Workers and Poisoned Places." Records show high exposures to radioactive dust that may have resulted in workers' deaths, the newspaper reported. "The risks were known, but not relayed to workers," the story said.

The Atomic Energy Commission found "hazardous concentrations" of airborne uranium dust in a site study in 1948, records show. Some workers were breathing in the dust at almost 200 times the maximum allowable at the time, the newspaper reported.