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Headline: Army Corps willing to seek study of NL pollution's impact on health

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By MARNIE EISENSTADT

Gazette Reporter

COLONIE - The Army Corps of Engineers has offered to request an investigation into the health effects of years of radioactive contamination from an old munitions plant.

At a public meeting Wednesday about the cleanup plan for the National Lead Industries site on Central Avenue in Colonie, Hans Honerlah, a health physicist with the Army Corps, said the agency would write a letter to the Agency for Toxic Substance and Disease Registry after residents said they were worried about the lasting health problems caused by the plant's pollution.

"I think we can commit to writing that letter, asking for a study of the area and the potential impact from National Lead," Honerlah said. The Army Corps has been coordinating the cleanup of the site since 1997.

NL Industries used depleted uranium to make armor-piercing shells and aircraft counterweights until about 1983, when it was closed after radioactive contamination was found on the property.

Current and former residents of the area spoke of increased cancer rates and unexplained illnesses among many of the people who lived near the plant.

Sharon Herr, who grew up a few blocks from the NL site, said she now has constant fatigue, muscle pain and thyroid abnormalities that she thinks are related to contamination left by NL Industries. Herr said she used to play in the water behind the plant - puddles she now knows were contaminated with uranium, thorium and lead.

County Legislator Marlene Prentiss, R-Colonie, also asked the Corps to help the community find out if residents' health problems are related to the contamination. Prentiss, who has spent all of her life on McNutt Avenue across from the NL site, said her childhood friend from up the street is now dying of cancer. That woman's parents also died of cancer.

Both Prentiss and Herr voiced concerns about the site during a public hearing on the Corps' new remediation plan for the 11-acre area.

Instead of burying soil tainted with lead, uranium-238 and thorium-232 in a 25-foot-high mound on the Central Avenue site, the Corps now wants to ship the soil out of the state. Dumps in Utah, Idaho and Texas would likely take some of the contaminated dirt.

The new plan will take two years longer and cost the federal government an additional \$20 million on top of the \$120 million already spent.

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Residents, though, lauded the revamped proposal. "This is what we've asked for from the beginning," said Jim Logan, president of the area neighborhood association.

The public comment period on the new plan lasts until July 17. A copy of the proposal is available for viewing at the William K. Sanford Town Library in Loudonville.

If the new plan is approved, the cleanup will be complete in the spring of 2003.