




# LOCKPORT SINCE 1821 Union-Sun & Journal



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## GUTERL: Still waiting for a clean bill

State, U.S. starting hands-on work at polluted Guterl Steel — but there's a long way to go before developers come calling

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The very slow process of cleaning up the old Guterl Specialty Steel lands is progressing to a new stage.

Both the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation are studying the acreage at 601-625 Ohio St. to ferret out contamination and figure out how best to remove or contain it.

The Guterl site is, of course, home to the old Simonds Saw & Steel factory, where atomic energy components were produced for the U.S. government from 1948 through 1956. It's long been known that the vacant factory is polluted with radioactive dust and that other parts of Simonds' original 70-acre parcel likely have some contamination associated with uranium and thorium processing.

Less familiar, perhaps, is the chemical pollution caused by 72 years of steel manufacturing. Simonds and its successor, Guterl, performed the dirty work of producing specialty metals for industrial and defense uses — and dumped their production wastes in a self-run landfill on the northwest quadrant of the property.




Allegheny Ludlum Steel Corp. operates in newer quarters between the abandoned factory and the landfill. When Guterl Steel went bankrupt in 1982, Allegheny-Ludlum bought out its assets and owns the newer property at 695 Ohio St. It declined to take possession of the old factory and landfill, however.

For cleanup purposes, these older parcels have no financially viable owner and are the government's problem to tackle.

Cleaning up Guterl is a two-party process. The DEC is taking on chemical pollution while the Army Corps of Engineers, acting for the U.S. Department of Energy, has legal responsibility for the radioactive pollution.

The Department of Energy shirked responsibility for Guterl's atomic legacy in the 1980s, citing a "hold harmless" clause in the government's production contract with Simonds Saw & Steel. Things changed after USA Today exposed the feds' old, secret deals with dozens of private manufacturers nationwide — and the harm that came to unprotected atomic production workers — in 2000. Guterl was admitted to the energy department/Army Corps of Engineers' Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program in 2005.

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As parallel study efforts are carried out, DEC and the Army Corps are sharing data but they're not planning a single, overarching cleanup effort, according to Joan Morrissey, community outreach coordinator for the Army Corps' Buffalo office. The Corps can only investigate and clean up radioactive pollution as Congress frees up money for the project, and the same is true of the DEC's chemical correction work and the state.

Both agencies have to follow a process laid out in the 1980 federal Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act, which raised the money to start Superfund. Before any bulldozers dig into earth or abandoned buildings are dismantled, the agencies go through a rigorous series of pre-steps:

- n Historical records review ("preliminary assessment").
- n Field studies of earth, water and/or air to uncover the locations and extent of pollution ("remedial investigation").
- n Proposal of clean-up alternatives based on the physical evidence ("feasibility studies").
- n Public review of proposals.
- n Final determination about the method.
- n Then cleanup/containment.

The DEC is doing field studies to measure chemical pollution now, while the Army Corps of Engineers is still drafting its formal written plan to hunt down radioactive contamination.

Each step in the federal process can take months or years, according to spokesmen from each agency. That suggests actual physical cleanup of Guterl is still a long ways off.

It's already been a long wait for the City of Lockport, which surely would love to see a deal struck for a nice, big plot on the city's west edge, conveniently near Routes 93 and 31. Until it's certified contaminant-free, there's no point even imagining, according to William Evert, director of Community Development.

"Nobody's going to even look at it until it's cleaned up," he said.

#### The nuclear issues

The Army Corps of Engineers plans to begin Guterl field studies this summer, project manager Ray Pilon said. The agency last week got permission from the City of Lockport to take soil samples from Outwater Park, so that it can compare "average" local soil to the contents dug from miscellaneous points around the Guterl site.

The comparison should provide "some idea of what needs to be cleaned up," he said.

Several studies have been done at Guterl over the years but they're of relatively little use to the Corps, according to Pilon. A 1976 survey by Oak Ridge National Laboratory identified radioactive contamination, primarily Uranium-238, inside and immediately outside the parts of the vacant factory where atomic production was done. Another Oak Ridge study in 1999 suggested radiation levels were negligible, that is, the same as occur in untainted soil.

The 1999 study said the factory interior was covered in dust and debris; the majority of the equipment used to roll uranium and

thorium in the 1940s and 1950s was still present; and the factory's nine buildings were deteriorating but fenced and isolated.

No studies have ever pinpointed all the places on the original Simonds tract where radiation might be found, however, or to what extent. Pilon said the Corps' field study will include samples from the factory plus a variety of other places where uranium, thorium and their leftovers are thought to have been handled: the landfill, the rail corridor used to ship the elements in and steel products out; Allegheny Ludlum property (although the buildings were constructed after Simonds ceased atomic production); an Erie Canal pump house on Ohio Street; and adjacent land on Richfield Street where Lombardi Overhead Door does business. Part of the property used to house a Simonds castings plant, according to owner John Lombardi III.

Once it begins, the field study will likely take about a year, Pilon said. Real estate agents are lining up the various property owners' consent to take samples now.

The health risks of radiation exposure are difficult to state, according to Paul Dickey, supervising public health engineer with the Niagara County Health Department. Humans are exposed to low levels from normal activities including flying and having X-rays, and so long as the exposures are brief they are not considered dangerous. Standard acceptable limits consider total exposure over a year's period.

The question at the Guterl site is whether there are areas where radioactive residue is sufficient to create unsafe levels of exposure over time.

"There could be elevated areas, and brief exposures wouldn't hurt you, but a person working 40 to 50 hours a week there could accumulate an exposure level that's above the acceptable maximum dose," Dickey said. "The (value of remediating the site) is getting it cleaned up to avoid restrictions on the amount of time that can be spent there."

#### The chemical issues

The DEC became involved with the Guterl site in 1988, after Guterl went out of business. A bankruptcy court found there were not enough private assets to cover the cost of cleanup and kicked the case over to the state Superfund.

In 1997, DEC took field samples around the Guterl property to get a preliminary idea about the types and locations of hazardous wastes throughout. Sample data showed soil and groundwater is contaminated with volatile organic (carbon-based) compounds, metals and phenols, "all pretty typical contaminants at these kinds of (industrial) sites," Meghan Boice-Green, DEC spokesman, said.

More extensive sampling began in the fall of 2006. Results are in from those samples and another round has been ordered for this summer, Boice-Green said. The project manager was not available to discuss specific findings.

"A lot of times the initial samples will turn up the need to do more," Boice-Green said.

"Whatever chemical pollution exists at Guterl, it poses no immediate risk to people away from the factory and the landfill, said Matt Forcucci, a public health specialist with the New York State Department of Health.

Groundwater is known to be polluted to some extent and is drawn to one of two places: the stone quarry or the Erie Canal.

In either case, Forcucci said, early testing suggested contamination is low-level and so diluted by water volume that it's barely measurable.

The factory's dilapidated state probably poses more risk to people than soil, dust or airborne chemical pollutants in or around it, he added. Drummed hazardous wastes left behind by Guterl were taken out of the factory in 1996.

"The immediate hazards are gone except for the buildings themselves — and the radiation," Forcucci said. "Bottom line, if people stay off the property and don't trespass, there is no exposure, and no likely problem for nearby (neighborhoods)."

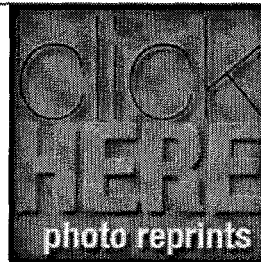
Guterl's chemical cleanup likely won't ever be 100 percent, according to Forcucci. Superfund aims, theoretically, to return lands to pre-pollutant release conditions but some contaminants have seeped into rock by now and can't be removed.

"With the old steel mills you almost never clean the land up to virgin conditions, you just manage the waste that's there to prevent further environmental impact," he said. "It's not the worst place I've ever seen."

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