

Materials found in field examined for hazards

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LOCKPORT — The state is investigating radioactive material discovered in a 100-acre field north of the Allegheny Ludlum Steel mill.

The area contained a railroad track, since removed, which was used to ship uranium and thorium in and out of the plant during the 1940s and 1950s, according to Frank Shattuck, the state Department of Environmental Conservation's regional solid and hazardous materials engineer.

Apparently some of those radioactive materials fell from the rail cars onto the ground and are still present today near the former site of the railroad spur.

"The initial indications were that there were just some chunks of the material laying around," Shattuck said.

The state says radiation levels at the surface of the soil are 100 times higher than the normal background level in the area, which is 10 microrems. A rem is the standard unit measuring radioactivity. A microrem is one-one-millionth of a rem.

The radioactive areas are not large; the biggest found thus far is about six feet in diameter.

"If a person stood on the area of highest radiation levels for one hour, he or she would receive a radiation dose equal to . . . one-half of one percent of the radiation dose people receive from natural radiation," according to a department fact sheet mailed to residents in the vicinity.

On June 14, Shattuck said, the state conducted a more detailed investigation of the site, taking soil samples on which test results are due by the first week of August. The crews were trying to determine if there were other areas of elevated radiation on the property.

He said the field is largely covered with heavy brush, and the radioactive hot spots are 300 to 400 feet from the nearest home.

"I wouldn't say a kid couldn't get back there, but they couldn't ride their bikes," Shattuck said. Although the site is basically flat, the brush makes access "pretty difficult," he said.

Two Lockport businesses, Overhead Door Co. and Ray Brigham Concrete Construction Corp., now own properties adjacent to the field. Shattuck said that in relatively recent times the field was graded, and it was possible some of the surface radioactivity was plowed onto the door company's property.

Officials of Overhead Door did not return a call to comment, but Shattuck said soil samples were taken on its land.

In the 1940s, the plant was owned by Simonds Saw and Steel Co. It later was acquired by Guterl Steel Co., which filed for bankruptcy in the early 1980s. Allegheny Ludlum then took over the plant.

Simonds milled uranium and thorium under a contract with the former U.S. Atomic Energy Commission.

The title to the field is held by the Niagara County Industrial Development Agency, by virtue of its having assisted Allegheny Ludlum with a \$10 million industrial revenue bond issue in 1984.

Agency Executive Director John R. Simon said the IDA had to give permission for state crews to inspect the land. He said the cleanup will not be paid for by the IDA. "We're always indemnified," Simon said.

Shattuck said the state is trying to get the federal government to foot the bill because of the site's connection to the Manhattan Project.

The U.S. Department of Energy has a Manhattan Project cleanup program called Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program. Shattuck said the Lockport location was once rejected cleanup under the federal program, but he said the state will try again.

He said the cleanup will probably not be elaborate. "It looks like these are limited sites that could be picked up with just a backhoe," Shattuck said. He said the radioactive soil would be placed in a sealed container and hauled into the "excised property" alongside the Allegheny Ludlum plant.

The "excised property" covers 9.1 acres and was too heavily contaminated to be kept in operation when Allegheny Ludlum bought the rest of the plant in 1984.

In 1996, the federal Environmental Protection Agency removed about 100 drums of mixed chemicals and radioactive material from the excised property. Two areas of soil radiation were found, along with radioactive dust on some of the old machinery in the plant.