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Tests indicate no danger in area of steel plant site

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News Niagara Bureau

LOCKPORT — Field tests show that low levels of radioactivity in a vacant parcel of land behind the Allegheny Ludlum Steel plant pose no danger to the public, a Department of Environmental Conservation report says.

The uranium and thorium found in the 100-acre field are believed to have resulted from the material falling off trains heading to the Ohio Street plant during the 1940s and 1950s, when Simonds Saw and Steel Co. had a contract with the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission to mill the radioactive materials.

The radiation was concentrated along the path of a former railroad spur that has since been removed.

The DEC overestimated the dose rate in a preliminary fact sheet mailed to residents of the area in June, according to Barbara Youngberg, chief of the DEC's Radiation Bureau. Even then, the mailing stated, "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 1 percent of the radiation dose people receive from natural radiation." That amount is 500 microrems, a unit of radiation dosage.

But the highest measurement found in the field was only 41 microrems, in an area behind the Lombardi Overhead Door Co. on Richfield Street.

Some leveling and filling work was done there in recent years, and the report said the only place in that area that radiation levels above normal background readings were found was on the back side of a mound of soil produced during the filling.

Youngberg said that likely means that contaminated soil was scraped from its original location during the work and packed into the pile. Part of the Lombardi property has been covered with concrete, from 4 inches to 2 feet thick. The report said, "This (41-microrem reading) means that one does not receive a significant dose by spending small amounts of time in the area, such as by walking across it, but long-term exposures should be avoided. Also, no further excavation should occur in the

Youngberg said that does not mean that moving the soil would expose more radiation, but rather that it would make cleanup more difficult. About 1,000 square feet was "contaminated by the grading," the report states.

In all, 5,000 to 6,000 square feet of soil would have to be removed to remediate the vacant site, according to the report.

Youngberg said: "Uranium is the most concentrated contaminant. It doesn't give off much radiation." Thorium is more radioactive, but far less of it was found.

Two automatic detectors were set up in different parts of the field. In four other spots, manual detectors were carried in. Two of those manual areas were behind the Overhead Door Co.

The radiation is all near the surface, consistent with the falling-off-the-train theory. Youngberg said: "We did take some soil samples. We believe (radioactivity) would not go deeper than two or three feet."

The report says the radiation level becomes 10 times lower for each 6 to 8 inches of soil cover.

Determining the level of radiation was somewhat complicated by the fact that fire brick is strewn about the area, believed to have come from Simonds Saw and Steel's old ovens. Youngberg said naturally occurring uranium and thorium are found in bricks.

She said the radiation was not deposited in the bricks by Simonds' work, because the radiation was not concentrated on one side of the bricks, as one would expect if they had lined an oven.

The DEC became involved in 1996 when a bankruptcy trustee for Guterl Steel Corp., which took over the former Simonds plant, wanted to abandon the property.

Allegheny Ludlum took over the plant in the 1980s after Guterl filed for bankruptcy protection. It "excised" some of the property where environmental problems were found.

The Niagara County Industrial Development Agency holds formal title to the field, because it assisted Allegheny Ludlum in 1984 by authorizing it to issue \$10 million in industrial revenue bonds.

It's unclear who will have to pay for the cleanup, but the IDA said earlier this year it would not have to. Youngberg said the Guterl bankruptcy trustee hired the Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Technology, a Tennessee company, to conduct its own radiation survey on the site. Those results are pending.

The DEC first surveyed the field in 1997, but dense brush prevented the inspectors from using their automated instruments. This spring the brush was cleared, and the radiation survey was conducted in June.