

## New report says 'government misled employees about radioactive materials'

By Scott Leffler  
Lockport Journal

The federal government misled employees of approximately 100 private companies handling large amounts of radioactive and toxic materials in the 1940s and 1950s, according to a report by an environmental research group.

The report, prepared for USA Today by the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research, states that the government and executives at the companies were aware of the dangers and provided false reassurances of safety to the workers at those companies. The report is cited in a three-day series of articles in USA Today.

Simonds Saw and Steel Co. of Lockport was one of three companies reviewed in detail in the report. The other two were Electro-Metallurgical in Niagara Falls, where uranium metal was made for eventual use in plutonium production reactors, and the Harshaw Chemical Co. in Cleveland, which produced uranium hexafluoride as part of the Manhattan Project.

Simonds was a steel rolling mill from 1910 to 1978. The company rolled uranium and thorium metal into billets for nuclear reactor fuel rods from 1948 to 1956.

Between 25 million and 35 million pounds of uranium were rolled at Simonds for the federal government. Simonds also rolled 30,000 to 40,000 pounds of thorium metal during that same span, the report states.

Energy Department officials responded to the report by saying there was a need to better catalog the use of civilian industrial sites in the production of America's nuclear arsenal during the Cold War.

Officials, however, did cite documents showing that the use of private companies in the weapons program had been acknowledged and been the subject of government reviews as early

as the 1970s.

Dr. Arjun Makhijani, president of the research group, said in a press release:

"Working conditions were appalling. Data from all three factories that we studied show that the radiation protection standards of the time were routinely violated. And there is incontrovertible evidence that the government, putting production first, failed to adequately protect the workers or properly inform them of the severe hazards that many of them faced."

The report, with specific reference to Simonds, says, "There is ample evidence that the plant premises became seriously contaminated during processing of radioactive materials."

The report did not attempt to assess the doses to workers during steel processing, nor did it attempt to estimate the consequences of food becoming contaminated as a result of poor industrial hygiene.

"Including all of these factors could substantially increase the dose estimates," the report states.

It says that when uranium metal is rolled, it becomes hot and can even catch fire. The emissions for the operation are typically a mixture of oxides of uranium.

Thorium was the bigger health problem because thorium results in larger radiation doses per unit than uranium, the report states.

It says, "Exposures to workers who processed thorium appear to have been substantial. Overall, it appears that exposures to specific workers who worked on thorium may have been severe."

Simonds employees were subject to between three and more than 50 times the safe levels of uranium during the processing, the report says. It also says they were subject to 25-165 times the safe dosages of thorium.

During a live chat on the USA Today Web site Thursday, someone identified as a Lockport resident told Makhijani they heard it's "in the water." The writer asked Makhijani if there is risk of the contamination being in the water supply or airborne.

Makhijani replied, "Yes, there is a risk from past production, generally speaking. I know that Western New York had a large number of nuclear

weapons related and other industrial operations, so contamination in the water and soil from past dumping and releases is a problem in the general area."

Dozens of private companies, including Simonds, contaminated the surrounding air, soil and water with toxic and radioactive waste, he said.

"For instance, even air in the lunch areas was measured to have contamination far above allowable limits of contamination," the IEED report states.

A Niagara Falls writer during the chat session asked Makhijani if a study will be done to determine what is happening to present workers at the sites. "I'm tired of seeing my neighbors die," the writer said.

Makhijani told the writer that "work in contaminated buildings can be risky, and the government is not doing a very good job of preventing the use of contaminated buildings."

Energy Secretary Bill Richardson said in a statement that the department "has been candid and honest with our current and former workers" about health risks posed by past work on weapons programs.

He said that "was especially the case" last year when he personally apologized to Cold War workers put at risk as part of their defense work at certain government nuclear weapons production facilities.

Richardson wants to create a central, computerized database of all facilities — including private plants and businesses — that were involved in weapons work.

Officials said it was acknowledged as early as the 1970s that these sites should be evaluated to determine the risks posed to workers and the environment and that some of these sites have been part of the department's weapons complex cleanup program.

*The Associated Press contributed to this report*

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