Federal plan would remove all nuclear waste from Lewiston – years from now

By Thomas J. Prohaska | News Niagara Reporter | @ThomasProhaska | Google+ on December 3, 2015 - 7:42 PM

LEWISTON – After 71 years, the federal government has decided that all the nuclear waste from the World War II atomic bomb project should be removed from Lewiston. However, it may take another generation for the job to be finished.

John Busse, Army Corps of Engineers project manager for the Niagara Falls Storage Site, as the waste repository is known, said Thursday that the Corps’ $490 million removal plan assumes funding won’t be available until at least 2022, and that Congress won’t appropriate it all at once. Sites where work is under way take precedence.

Busse expects that the funding will come in 10 annual installments. If his timetable is accurate, the residue from the bomb that helped to end World War II won’t be completely gone from Niagara County until 2032.

The plan calls for 193,230 cubic yards of waste to be excavated. Some would be treated on site. All of it would be hauled by trucks in 3,800 large steel containers to Waste Control Specialists, a privately owned Texas facility licensed by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to house it safely for 10,000 years.

At first, nuclear waste was housed in a concrete silo on the Lewiston site.

In the 1980s, a cleanup project on surrounding properties, also contaminated with radioactivity, led to the consolidation of all the waste, including contaminated soil, the demolition debris from the silo, and other nuclear garbage, in a 10-acre landfill called the Interim Waste Containment Structure. The Manhattan Project waste is inside a building within the landfill, which used to be the Ordnance Works’ water treatment plant.

“These residue materials are going to be radioactive for 1,000 years,” Busse said.

The Corps studied four alternatives, three of which called for partial removals or a thicker cap on the landfill. Busse said the Corps has chosen a total cleanup instead.

“The community’s been waiting a long time for this,” he said.

It will continue to wait a long time for the project to be done. The first step is a public comment period that starts Monday and ends Feb. 6. It will include a public meeting at 6:30 p.m. Jan. 13 in the Lewiston Senior Citizens Center, Lower River and Pletcher roads. The comment period starts at 8 p.m.

After that, Busse said, a 12-to-18-month review process will lead to a final decision. “We have to take this all the way up to the assistant secretary of the Army for civil works,” he said.
If the plan is approved, the Corps has to go through another study and review process for plans to clean up the rest of the storage site, including the groundwater. Once those plans are chosen and approved, the Corps can start asking Congress for funding.

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