

Cuts may derail cleanup of waste at West Valley, Linde

By DOUGLAS TURNER
News Washington Bureau Chief

WASHINGTON — The Clinton administration on Thursday warned that deep House cuts in nuclear waste cleanup funds could shut down or critically delay work at the West Valley Demonstration Project in Cattaraugus County and a proposed remedial project at the Linde site in the Town of Tonawanda.

The proposed cuts in the Republican-controlled Congress total \$151 million.

On Wednesday, the full House voted to cut \$100 million from current 1995 appropriations, and a subcommittee voted to slice another \$51 million.

Rep. Amory Houghton, R-Corning, whose district contains the West Valley project, voted for the legislation containing the \$100 million spending cut.

Houghton could not be reached for comment.

Rep. John J. LaFalce, D-Town of Tonawanda, called the development distressing.

The Department of Energy budget "to deal with these radioactive wastes for the rest of the fiscal year was already too small . . . and now we're told they must get by with 20 percent less," he said.

"This is just one more example of the irresponsible and thoughtless slashing on the part of the Gingrich storm troopers," he added, referring to House Speaker Newt Gingrich, a Georgia Republican.

In the wake of these actions, the Department of Energy conducted a multicity conference call to warn reporters that the reductions could affect 90 sites in 26 states.

Thomas P. Grumbly, assistant energy secretary for environmental management, said the actions could stop work from going forward on West Valley's vitrification project — the process of converting 600,000 gallons of high-level radioactive sludge into glass logs.

Grumbly said new projects, such as the plan to deal with about 8,000 tons of waste dating to World War II from River Road in the Town of Tonawanda at the former Linde facility, could be sidelined indefinitely.

Estimates of the project cost range from \$58 million to \$201 million.

"Congress cannot continue to cut away without real consequences," Grumbly said. "If the Congress believes there are unlimited efficiencies that can be gained by cutting this budget, they are wrong.

"We are dealing with some of the highest environmental risks in the world today. We have a duty and a moral obligation to protect the safety of the workers at these dangerous facilities and the communities that surround them."

Other cleanup sites that could be affected by the cuts, Grumbly said, include Ashland Oil and Seaway Industrial Park, Town of Tonawanda, and nuclear storage sites in Lewiston and Niagara Falls.