

WNY nuclear waste cleanup projects threatened by federal cuts

By MIKE VOGEL
News Staff Reporter

Deep slashes in federal funding for nuclear waste cleanups could leave Western New York with an even deeper environmental debt, community activists said Tuesday.

Congressional efforts to cut deeper than the \$100 million already trimmed from the Clinton administration's budget proposal could cripple radioactive waste cleanup projects in West Valley, the Town of Tonawanda and Lewiston, environmentalists warned.

"This week we're looking at another \$51 million in cuts that will directly impact sites in Western New York," said James Rauch of the Coalition on West Valley Nuclear Waste.

"Spending now on these contaminated sites is much more cost-effective than spending later," he said. "It's not cost-effective to walk away from these sites."

"We're worried that these cleanup projects, which are just getting under way, will be cut short, and the problems will be left for future generations," added coalition leader Ray Vaughan.

In addition to the former nuclear fuels reprocessing center at West Valley, the Niagara Frontier has five radioactive-waste sites in the Tonawanda area, the Niagara Falls Storage Site, which contains 255,000 cubic yards of radioactive Lake Ontario Ordnance Works waste, and a scattering of small radioactively contaminated sites throughout the area.

Many of the sites involved wastes generated by the Manhattan Project during World War II to develop the atomic bomb. Included is one site in Buffalo, a

former Hopkins Street steel plant where concrete flooring has been found to have some uranium contamination.

While the federal Department of Energy grapples with debates over the five Tonawanda sites and the Niagara County facilities, work has been under way for years at West Valley — home to both the Energy Department's West Valley Demonstration Project and a state-run low-level radioactive waste disposal site.

After 13 years of research, consuming about \$100 million a year, the federal demonstration project is scheduled to light its high-tech ceramic melters next January to begin three years of converting 600,000 gallons of high-level radioactive liquid waste into glass logs that can be stored in deep vaults

elsewhere.

"To curtail funding now, at this crucial point, would be an expensive and foolish economy and would jeopardize public health," Vaughan said.

The proposed cuts have brought together the environmental coalition and Ashford town leaders, at loggerheads for years over the idea of bringing more wastes to West Valley for treatment or storage. Both sides oppose cutbacks for the demonstration project.

Other groups, long focused on other issues, also are joining the protest.

Western New York has been singled out as a dumping ground and "sacrifice area" for all kinds of wastes, said Angela Keil of the Buffalo Greens, a group that has concentrated on recycling and oth-

er urban concerns.

"The one great hope for us has been the cleanup in West Valley," she said. If that is abandoned, she added, "then we go by 'Once a dump, always a dump.'"

"It's very much like the other (kind of) debt," she said. "The more you let it go, the larger it gets."

The proposed additional budget trims, recommended by a congressional subcommittee after Congress had already approved \$100 million in DOE budget cuts, are being considered as part of GOP efforts to control federal spending and honor the Republican "Contract With America."

Timothy P. Henderson, president of Residents Organized for Lewiston-Porter's Environment, said "the proposed \$151 million

budget cuts to DOE radioactive waste site cleanups are not by any stretch of the imagination 'prudent fiscal policy' or 'sound budgetary constraint.'"

"Why is it that our new Congress can find \$20 billion to boost the economy of our neighbors to the south of the Rio Grande while sentencing our own Niagara River to a slow death?" he asked.

"We have spent millions on Haiti, Somalia and the rest of the world," added Ralph Krieger, president of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers local at the former Linde plant site in the Town of Tonawanda. "But when the value of an American citizen comes up for discussion, we end up last on the list."

Local Democratic lawmakers, including Rep. John J. LaFalce,

Sen. Daniel P. Moynihan and Assemblyman Paul A. Tokasz, expressed support for Tuesday's environmental protest.

Radioactive waste cleanups carry huge price tags. Total West Valley costs are estimated as high as \$3.5 billion, and plans to deal with about 8,000 tons of Manhattan Project waste at the former Linde facility could cost from \$58 million to \$201 million.

Rauch said Thomas P. Grumbly, assistant energy secretary for environmental management, had not decided by Tuesday on which of his department's projects would bear the brunt of the proposed additional 20 percent cut.

"You don't spend \$1 billion on a project and then stop halfway through," he said of efforts to cut the West Valley project.