

U.S. funds cleanup of N-waste at Linde

Local pressure spurred action

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WASHINGTON — The Department of Energy plans to spend \$14 million to remove nuclear waste that has been stored since the 1940s at the former Linde industrial site in the Town of Tonawanda.

And a department official said more federal funding could be coming in future years to remove nuclear wastes from some of the other sites in the town that were involved in the Manhattan Project to build an atomic bomb.

Thomas P. Grumbly, assistant secretary for environmental management, announced the decision Thursday in a letter to Rep. John J. LaFalce, D-Town of Tonawanda.

Craig DeRemer, congressional liaison at the Department of Energy, said the chances are "rather good" for further funding for removal of some of the 8,000 tons of low-level nuclear waste stored at the Linde site off Sheridan Drive and three other sites off River Road in the town.

"Is it unrealistic to expect that everything has to go? Yes," DeRemer said. "But what we have to do is look at the risks at the various sites and make sure that we are protecting the health and the environment."

The Energy Department's decision partially reverses a 1993 department decision that the waste should be treated and stored in a cell along the Niagara River rather than be moved out of state.

That 1993 decision was soundly rejected by local residents and officials who pushed to have the waste removed from the sites.

DeRemer said the department decided to remove the waste at the former Linde Air Products site because of continued pressure from LaFalce and local officials.

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In addition, he said Energy Secretary Hazel O'Leary "has strongly encouraged Thomas Grumbly and others to get some actions under way, so that we can build public confidence in the department and not just be studying everything forever."

He said it is unclear whether the \$14 million will be enough to remove all the waste from the Linde site, adding that won't be known until cleanup workers begin the job this fall, with completion scheduled for next summer.

Under current plans, the cleanup will entail the decontamination of three former Linde buildings that are now part of Praxair's Town of Tonawanda plant.

A fourth building will be demolished, and a 12,000-cubic-yard pile of contaminated material will be removed. All of the nuclear waste will be taken to an out-of-state site.

The work will be funded under the Energy Department's Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program. DeRemer said congressional budget-cutters have not attacked that program, meaning that funding for the Linde cleanup is secure even though work on the 1996 budget has not been completed.

In his letter to LaFalce, Grumbly said he planned to visit the Town of Tonawanda site this fall.

LaFalce, meanwhile, said he would keep up the pressure on the Energy Department to remove all of the town's nuclear waste.

"I say let's rejoice," he said. "But I intend this to be the first step."

The Energy Department has said it would cost up to \$201 million to move all the waste out of state.

The three other sites where nuclear waste is stored include the Seaway Landfill and two old Ashland Refinery properties.

Local officials were elated by news of the funding, calling it the most significant victory so far in the long battle with the Energy Department to rid the town of nuclear waste.

"This is a significant event," said County Legislator Charles M. Swanick, D-Kenmore, who is also a member of the Coalition Against Nuclear Material in Tonawanda, the group leading the fight.

"It now establishes a precedent for removing all of the radioactive material in Tonawanda," Swanick said. "It puts to rest once and for all DOE's determination to keep the (radioactive) materials in Tonawanda."

Richard Tobe, who heads the coalition, called the development "great news."

Tobe said the coalition agreed two months ago to a Energy Department proposal to clean up the waste in stages, and that department funding appeared to signal the first step in that plan.

"We're very pleased that it has started," he said.

Town Supervisor Carl J. Calabrese agreed. "It's a step in the right direction," he said. "We're getting cleanup."

Swanick said he hopes that removal of the waste will open the way for development of the town's waterfront. "This breaks up the logjam," he said.

He said he is confident that the Energy Department will continue to fund the rest of the cleanup.

"When you look at the DOE budget, and the amount it spends on cleanup, it (the rest of the funding needed) is not a significant amount of money," he said.

Swanick and Tobe praised LaFalce, who they said was instrumental in obtaining the funding.