

Neighbors worried about radioactive waste in landfill

By Jordan Williams, News 4 Anchor

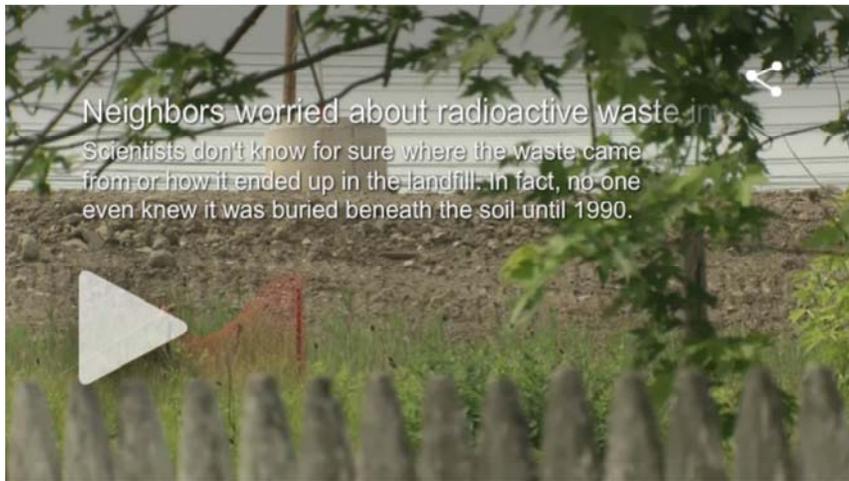
Published: July 28, 2014, 5:55 pm | Updated: July 29, 2014, 8:53 am

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TOWN OF TONAWANDA, N.Y. (WIVB) – Federal experts admit it may take another decade to clean-up radioactive waste at an old landfill in the Town of Tonawanda. The waste came from the first atomic bomb that was developed seventy years ago at the end of World War II.

Scientists don't know for sure where the waste came from or how it ended up in the landfill. In fact, no one even knew it was buried beneath the soil until 1990.

The 55-acre landfill sits just north of I-290 on the edge of town. A neighborhood in the City of Tonawanda is immediately to the north. The radioactive waste is limited to a five-acre portion of the landfill.

– story continues below timeline –

Landfill Timeline

1930's - Present

1930's Town of Tonawanda landfill opens	1942 Manhattan Project work begins	1962 Neighborhood develops near landfill	1989 Landfill closes	1990 First radioacti detected
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The neighborhood next door

When Carol and Joe Fillinger built their house on Hackett Drive in 1962, they thought they had found their piece of heaven. "It was nice. The boys would play horseshoes back there and things like that," Carol recalled.

They knew the landfill was there, but had no idea there was any contamination.

The Fillingers even had a garden in their backyard until they found out what was buried feet from their fence. "You wonder how much damage it's done," she said. "You wonder really what you've ingested all these years."

Riverview Elementary is also in the neighborhood.

The Fillinger family is part of a lawsuit with 50 or 60 other individuals filed in 2007 against the town and the company that currently maintains the landfill. The attorney representing them says the suit is moving along slowly; he's still in the fact-finding phase of discovery.

Contamination discovered

Federal government scientists first found evidence of radioactive waste at the landfill in 1990. Teams from the the U.S. Department of Energy used a gamma-scanning van with radiation detection equipment to survey this and other WNY sites.

During WWII the U.S. Army's Manhattan Engineer District contracted with Linde Air, located about a mile south of the landfill to refine uranium. It's unclear if waste from Linde was what was buried at the landfill, but federal experts say the radioactive elements at the landfill are similar to elements found at other Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program (FUSRAP) sites.

Carol Fillinger told News 4 Investigates she's watched workers suit up and take samples for years. "They come out in HAZMAT suits and sometimes the cordon off the whole area and decontaminate before they leave. It's kind of scary," she said.

Town of Tonawanda leaders call for action

Anthony Caruana, Town of Tonawanda supervisor, said public safety comes first. "We want to make sure that our residents in both the City and Town of Tonawanda and businesses nearby are protected," he said.

Caruana said the town closed the landfill in 1989, and it's up to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to clean-up the radioactive waste. "Initially, the Army Corps denied it was theirs until we made them do testing and found out it's the same signature as the other stuff, so it had to be from the same project, the Manhattan Project," he recalled.

Caruana said he cannot quantify the danger for the families who live to the north. "We know [the radioactive waste] is in there, but I don't know what the amount of contaminants that are in there," he said. "That's what we're waiting for them to tell us."

Robert Morris from the Town of Tonawanda took News 4 Investigates to the contamination zone. Orange plastic fences surround the five acres. The families' homes are right on the other side. "Obviously, the water flows down this hillside into this contaminated area here. And it's pretty flat to the houses," said Morris, town consultant and retired director of technical support.

He remains concerned about the cost. "We have to relocate it anyways, and once you touch it, you can't put it back in your own landfill. You have to take it to a nuclear site which would be millions of dollars to the town," Morris said.

What are the options?

News 4 Investigates went to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to get answers and analysis. Stephen Buechi, the senior project manager, said, "There's a potential future risk if nothing is done at the landfill."

He says the initial proposed plan in 2007 called for no action based on testing and data at the time. Following a public comment period between 2007 and 2009, the Corps performed additional soil testing and re-examined its risk assessment for the landfill. In 2012, based on the results, the Corps determined that the risks were within regulatory limits.

READ MORE | US Army Corps of Engineers Report
(<http://www.lrb.usace.army.mil/Missions/HTRW/FUSRAP/TonawandaLandfill.aspx>)

For now people are safe, Buechi said. But, eventually, erosion could exposed the buried radioactive waste. How much is there? The feds won't say. Nobody's saying how long it will take for the area to be safe, either.

News 4 Investigates requested spending information from the Corps. We found out the federal government has spent almost four and a half million since 2008 on things like annual soil samples.

Buechi wouldn't say how much material is buried at the landfill. "It's primarily just loose soil," he offered.

Could it be capped? Should it be moved? Buechi said, "The important thing to remember, [is] currently the risk for someone on the landfill is within the established regulatory limits."

Buechi said it's premature to discuss what the feds will do. Options from other similar sites include: excavation and moving waste to different locations, capping material in place to prevent future exposure, or using technologies that could reduce the hazard.

The Army Corp of Engineers hopes to release a proposed plan and feasibility study in early 2015. Once the proposed plan is issued, public review will follow. The Corps will consider input and issue a final record of decision. Then comes remediation which would require federal funding. The Feds admit permanent clean-up could take a decade.

Town supervisor Caruana's mind is already made up. "Get rid of all of it. We want it out. For the safety of our residents in both the city and town and any businesses in that area," he said.

The Fillingers just want the waste to go away — one way or another. "Any damage that's gonna be done, we figure it's already done to us. It's not gonna make any difference to us at this point," Carol Fillinger said.

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Philip Sweet · 5 days ago

The Corps of Engineers performed a remedial investigation of The Tonawanda Landfill Site in January 2006 and a range of recreational exposures to the Landfill "Hackett Drive "was considered, from 2 hours per day for 6 months a year for 6 years (juvenile), to 15 minutes per weekday plus 23 minutes per weekend day for 30 years (adult).

The exposure scenario assumed that since the backyard of some residents directly abutted the Landfill that extensive recreational direct exposure could occur to wastes in the Landfill.

Because there has been no Corps of Engineers ROD," Record of Decision", promised to be released to the public shortly after 2007 it has placed our whole community in limbo and worry regarding major health implications.

According to US Army Reg. AR700-48 with utilizing only state, local and congressional government support and request, IE Schumer Gillabrand.R. Schimminqer. by following their own regulation they are compelled to fully remediate the landfill.