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Poison from National Lead site lingers

New study shows people who lived near or worked at former munitions factory in Colonie, N.Y. have depleted uranium in their bodies.

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December 6, 2007

COLONIE, NEW YORK - Former workers at a Cold War-era munitions plant and nearby residents still carry traces of toxic depleted uranium in their bodies, a team of scientists said Wednesday.

The findings, unveiled at a news conference, seem to contradict an earlier assessment by the federal government that deemed it impossible to measure contamination because it had been so long since the emissions ended.

Contrary to that 2004 assessment by the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, the scientists from England and the University at Albany say they can now show that more than two decades later, people still carry the radioactive metal in their bodies.

The state shuttered the former NL Industries plant in 1984.

Because the contamination can still be detected, a study could be done to track down the thousands of people who could have been exposed, the researchers said. But additional financial resources are needed to pay for the pricey tests, they said.

"Our new work, using better methodology, shows that we can overcome this difficulty," said Randall Parrish, a professor at the University of Leicester.

The findings will soon be published in the journal *Science of the Total Environment*.

Neighbors and former employees have demanded more detailed analysis of the cancers, immune disorders and other illnesses they say have plagued their families.

Almost three months ago, the Army Corps of Engineers completed the major phase of its \$190 million cleanup at the former plant at 1130 Central Ave., originally operated by the National Lead Co.

Now, the scientists and members of an activist group, Community Concerned about NL Industries, are calling for federal funding to study the scope and effects of the contamination.

"There's never been a careful study of a population known to be exposed to depleted uranium," said David Carpenter of the Institute for Health and the Environment at UAlbany. "Somebody needs to step in and really answer the question, 'What are the health effects?'"

A spokesman for Gov. Eliot Spitzer said the report "should prompt the federal government to do more testing and monitoring.

"We support the community's request and urge the Army Corps of

Engineers to address these serious concerns," said the spokesman, Michael Whyland.

Previous cancer studies by the state Department of Health, activists said, were overly broad and inconclusive.

An estimated 5 to 10 metric tons of uranium dust was spewed from the plant's smokestacks between the late 1950s and early 1980s as it manufactured armor-piercing projectiles and burned the waste in a furnace.

Parrish has also tested British soldiers believed to have been exposed on battlefields to depleted uranium weapons. The weapons produce dust on impact, leading some to believe it could be linked to illnesses known collectively as Gulf War syndrome.

In about 800 tests of soldiers, Parrish said he was hard-pressed to detect a single urine sample containing depleted uranium. In Colonie, all five former NL employees tested positive at "very high levels." About two dozen people were tested in all.

Roughly 20 percent of the residents or nearby workers also tested positive at lesser levels, Parrish said. The scientists cautioned that the small size of their study prevents extrapolating the results to a wider population, but it provides compelling evidence that more research needs to be done.

"A lot of my co-workers died young," said Mike Aidala, 70, who worked at the plant from 1958 to 1980, starting as a janitor and working his way up. "Whether the plant was the reason, I'll never know."

Aidala, who also is an Albany County legislator, was among those who tested positive for depleted uranium.

Tony Impellizzeri, 59, who grew up on Yardboro Avenue just behind the plant, said he knows about 45 people in the neighborhood stricken with cancer. Impellizzeri said he hopes the current research will prompt action, unlike previous instances "where nothing seems to happen."

The scientists also said they found depleted uranium in dust in four buildings around the 11.2-acre site - in some cases at levels that exceed the Army Corps' cleanup standard for soil.

The extent of the contamination in other buildings is not clear, and the danger it poses could depend on whether that dust is disturbed, said John G. Arnason, a professor of earth and atmospheric sciences at UAlbany.

The Army Corps has finished removing contaminated soil from the site and has submitted a plan to state environmental regulators to monitor groundwater. That plan could be ready for public comment by spring, said James Moore, the project's manager for the Army Corps.

Moore said he had not been briefed on the research and noted that the Army Corps had not been charged with cleaning inside neighboring buildings.

In the 1980s, the Department of Energy cleaned about 53 neighboring properties, but the work was limited mostly to the exterior of the buildings and yards.

"It was like Love Canal," Impellizzeri said. "They should have knocked down all these buildings on Yardboro Avenue and started over again."