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Plea made for federal inquiry

Groups push for new investigation into allegations radioactive materials at Stark toxic waste site

By Bob Downing

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UNIONTOWN - Three groups connected with a closed toxic waste dump in Stark County made new pleas yesterday for federal help.

The Concerned Citizens of Lake Township, the Akron chapter of the American Friends Service Committee and the Project on Government Oversight in Washington, D.C., asked Ohio congressional leaders to press federal officials to delay changing the cleanup orders for the Industrial Excess Landfill.

The three groups made their request in a three-page letter to U.S. Sens. George Voinovich and Mike DeWine, both Ohio Republicans, and U.S. Rep. Tom Sawyer, D-Akron.

They asked the three politicians to immediately contact U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Christie Todd Whitman to get her to delay the cleanup of the 30-acre federal Superfund site off Cleveland Avenue Northwest.

The EPA hopes to hold a public meeting in Uniontown in mid-April on changing a cleanup plan for the dump, agency spokesman Dave Novak said. That would be followed by a 30-day public comment period.

The groups said the cleanup should not proceed because of what they called conflicts of interest and self-serving investigations involving the U.S. Justice Department and the U.S. EPA.

They said the Justice Department has a history of shielding government contractors from prosecution and the EPA, which has repeatedly said radiation is not a problem at the dump, has a "serious vested interest in an unchanged outcome."

They cited the recent federal investigation that discounted claims by former landfill owner-operator Charles Kittinger that egg-shaped containers filled with radioactive plutonium-238 were dumped by the Army in the late 1960s or early 1970s.

"We have spoken several times to Mr. Kittinger and find him and his account of what he saw to be very credible," the three groups said in their letter.

Federal officials have said they do not believe there has been any conflict of interest or wrongdoing.

The EPA and Justice Department spent eight months investigating Kittinger's claim and were unable to verify it. U.S. District Judge John Manos in Cleveland concurred that Kittinger's story could not be documented.

The three groups also questioned whether Monsanto Chemical or Rockwell International, both one-time contractors at federal nuclear weapons facilities, could have dumped radioactive waste in Uniontown.

The groups urged Whitman to turn the investigation over to federal EPA Ombudman Robert Martin and to provide him with the needed staff, resources and authority to deal with the case.

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