

4/24/99

Suit isn't expected to delay cleanup of radioactive waste

■ The Army Corps of Engineers is being challenged by a company that says the waste might not be disposed of in a safe place.

BY COLLEEN CARROLL
Of the Post-Dispatch

The Army Corps of Engineers said it expects no delays in cleaning up radioactive waste around the St. Louis area despite a suit that raises questions about the safety of its disposal.

Envirocare of Utah Inc., a company that specializes in the cleanup of radioactive waste, is protesting the corps' bidding process for waste contracts to clean up the sites in St. Louis and elsewhere. A hearing on those contracts, worth about \$400 million, is set for Wednesday in the U.S. Court of Claims in Washington.

Envirocare, which is one of only a few companies nationwide licensed to handle radioactive waste, alleges that the waste at the St. Louis sites and at sites elsewhere could wind up in a landfill not licensed to accept it.

Officials from the corps, which took control of cleanup efforts from the Department of Energy in 1997, estimate that nearly 600,000 cubic yards of radioactive waste linger in the St. Louis area, scattered around sites in north St. Louis County, near Lambert Field, at the Mallinckrodt Chemical plant north of downtown and in Madison.

The sites were contaminated because of the Manhattan Project, the effort that led to development of the atomic bomb during World War II.

Lou Dell'Orco, corps project manager in St. Louis, said the corps has removed about 35,000 cubic yards of waste from the St. Louis area in the past year and a half. The soonest any of the sites would be cleaned up would be by 2005, he said.

Dell'Orco said no Missouri landfill can accept nuclear waste, so St. Louis area residents should not worry that the waste will remain here.

The suit surfaced more than a year after Congress — fed up with the pace of Department of Energy cleanup efforts — transferred the nationwide cleanup of 24 radioactive sites to the corps.

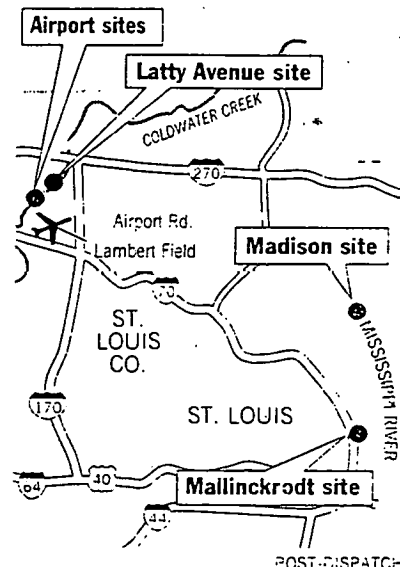
That transfer pleased some St. Louis-area residents who monitor the cleanup of local radioactive sites, but it also left some questions unanswered. Among them: Who regulates the radioactive waste now handled by the corps?

The Department of Energy had the authority to regulate itself and the waste it handled. For waste disposal in St. Louis, the department relied on Envirocare.

The corps has no such authority to self-regulate, and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission has refused the task.

Envirocare officials say that means that the corps may risk public safety by sending the unregulated waste to unlicensed landfills. The corps waste may be unregulated, said Dell'Orco, but that

Radioactive waste cleanup sites



"doesn't mean you can just put it anywhere."

Corps officials say states will regulate the waste. State officials use permits to decide which landfills can accept nuclear waste, said corps spokesman George Hanley. The corps will send its waste only to landfills licensed to accept it, he said.

For years, cleanup of the waste has frustrated North County residents, who fought to force the federal government to purge the waste.

Now residents are pleased with the cleanup's progress, said Richard Cavanaugh, chairman of a citizens committee monitoring the cleanup.

The committee plans to meet at trailers on the Latty Avenue cleanup site in Hazelwood to discuss the implications of the Envirocare case. The meeting, scheduled for 11:30 a.m. May 14, is open to the public.