

Army Corps scraps St. Lawrence Island clean up

by Steve Kakaruk

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The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers terminated a Saint Lawrence Island clean up contract. 42 former military sites on St. Lawrence Is. were scheduled for clean up. The Corps under the Defense Environmental Restoration Account (DERA) scrapped the clean up when the St. Lawrence Is. landowners requested on clean up policies.

Years ago the U.S Army left behind toxic and hazardous materials for the St. Lawrence Is. people. In an effort to clean up the island the Corps was awarded a contract to clean it up. However, the Corps decided to scrap

the project because they did not want to compensate landowners for losses of their non-renewable resources and could come to agreement about the negotiations regarding clean up.

Bruce Batton, spokesman for Col. Wilbur T. Gregory said, "The DERA program, in general, is offering the best and most beneficial program for them."

Bryan MacLean, Bering Straits Coastal Management Program (BSCMP) said, "We have reviewed the preliminary environmental assessment prepared by the Corps of Engineers prepared for the St. Lawrence clean up project. As a result of our reviewing and concerns expressed by island residents the Bering

Straits Coastal Area Resource Board passed a resolution calling on the Corps of Engineers to work with the BSCMP to develop a standard set of policies and procedures to be used when working with rural villages and village corporations.

Batton said, "We look at it (clean-up) doing a lot of good."

MacLean continued, "The Corps response to the Bering Straits Coastal Resource Service Area Board resolution has been that it is too cumbersome to work directly with affected coastal management problems. And that the proper agency for the Corps to deal with is the Department of Government Coordination in the Governors Office."

MacLean ended saying, "It is the intent of the BSCMP to report the direction and desires of the region and communities. At a joint meeting Savoonga and Gambell in the latter part of January (Jan. 27), the two communities jointly appointed Edna Apatiki and George Noongwook as their official spokesperson on behalf of their project. We were requested to refer all inquiries to those spokespersons. We are respecting this request, however the BSCMP is concerned about the precedence being set and possible consequences for future clean up not only in our region but across the state."

In accordance with the contract the Corps would remove all toxic and hazardous waste. Batton said, "Last year we weren't prepared to do this there was no determination in the contract. Contractors didn't understand and didn't know where the sites were. The contractors and corporations agreed to hire guides and indeed were not forced by residents to pay them."

However the Corps scrapped the clean up because, "we thought it was covered in the contract-we never agreed on how much to spend on the clean up," said Batton.

George Noongwook, Savoonga Native Corporation said, "minimal input from the residents on the island has resulted."

Residents (private landowners) are very interested in protecting what is theirs. Noongwook said, "a bid process was completed. Savoonga should have been included since the beginning."

Col. Gregory said, "the intent of the DERA program is to restore some of

Alaska's natural beauty and remove safety hazards. We can and want to do the work however compensation of the type requested here is not appropriate to this project."

Batton said, "we could not meet their requests for payment to get that work completed."

The Saint Lawrence Island residents would like the Corps to remove: PCB's, asbestos, human garbage, sewage, petroleum, medical supplies, ammunition (live), and alcohol. The Corps and the Saint Lawrence Islanders have also been in disagreement over gravel to be used for two landfills. The two landfills would be permanent and the Islanders would have to live with them forever.

Batton said, "All that is on the Island is basically 'harmless junk' and all we want to do is bury it, follow the permit process without any objections from the Natives."

The Corporation has an interest in the gravel that will be used to bury asbestos, concrete, and things the Corps will leave behind. There are over 14 National Archaeology sites on the Island. Each are recorded with the Smithsonian Institute. Islanders would like to protect them and insure that no accident occurs that they may be held responsible for.

Batton said, "costs shouldn't be resolved in this kind of contract."

Although the Corps had long ago left the Island littered with stuff, they have also offered to remove some of the stuff and bury the rest. Batton said, "yes there are 42 sites and admittedly we did leave it behind, but it would be so incredibly expensive and we couldn't remove it all." Batton added, "two separate and distinct landfills is easier than removing the stuff and it's not cost effective to work with the Natives."

DERA is a nationwide program conducted by the Corps since 1984. Over half of a \$68 million in DERA funds have gone to Alaska contracts. This particular clean up would have cost \$6.7 million. Saint Lawrence Islanders would like to be considered because they not only are the private land owners but seek equality as other private landowners. Noongwook said, "I imagine that if the Corps proposed landfill on someone else's land if landowners agreed to it, the Corps would pay for it."