

# Community Forum

Enquirer Editorial

## Fernald secrets now in the open

For decades the uranium processing plant at Fernald was a dirty secret.

Now, 17 years after the facility in northwest Hamilton County was closed, some of those secrets will be shared with researchers studying the health effects of low-level radiation on people.

Fernald was a foundry operated under a private contractor as part of the Cold War nuclear weapons program. When the plant opened in 1951 the operators told workers not to tell friends and family what they did there. A water tower was painted with a red and white checkerboard pattern, and the sign at the gate said Fernald Basic Feed Materials. If pass-

ersby or neighbors thus got the impression that the place had something to do with dog chow, nobody minded.

What was learned 30 years later was that almost 300 pounds of radioactive dust had been released into the air because of faulty filtration systems; radon gas had been leaking at the site for years; and other radioactive waste had been improperly handled or buried at the 1,050-acre site. By then the Cold War was ending, production had shut down, and questions were being asked about what the impact of the operation had been on the workers and neighbors of the plant.

Separate class-action suits

were filed on behalf of former workers and the neighboring residents in Crosby Township. The workers settled for \$20 million in a deal that included lifetime medical monitoring. The residents' suit was settled in 1989 for \$78 million and included a medical monitoring program for 9,500 local people.

That research included blood and urine samples, kidney and liver function tests, medical questionnaires and the monitoring of hospitalizations for the residents.

The monitoring program for the neighbors, overseen by researchers at the University of Cincinnati, is nearing its end, and the results will be shared with other researchers, which

could lead to better understanding of radiation effects in other situations, including long-term effects of X-rays or exposure from a nuclear accident or attack.

It has taken more than \$4.5 billion and 18 years to clean up Fernald after the plant ceased production in 1989. More than 1.5 million tons of waste had to be removed from the site. Cleanup halted last October, and from then until this past June workers toiled to turn it into a nature preserve.

No one knows how long it will take to understand Fernald's full effects on its workers and neighbors. But with the sharing of this research, there won't be any more secrets.