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U.S. denies it attempted to gag clean-up plan critic

ST. CATHARINES (CP) — A United States official has denied his government is using bully-boy tactics to keep a Canadian government scientist from speaking out about a controversial court decision involving a clean-up of the Hyde Park chemical dump in Niagara Falls, N.Y.

In a strongly worded letter to External Affairs Minister Mark MacGuigan, Toby Vigod, a lawyer for Pollution Probe of Toronto, charged U.S. officials "are using diplomatic channels to try to both silence and discredit" Douglas Hallett, a senior scientist with Environment Canada.

Technical witness

Hallett served as a technical witness for both Pollution Probe and Operation Clean, a Niagara Falls, N.Y.-based environmental group, in U.S. district court in Buffalo last year.

The two groups were challenging the adequacy of a proposed plan, devised by the U.S. government and Hooker Chemical and Plastics Corp.

to clean up the Hyde Park dump, which was approved April 30.

Hallett was on a Canadian Broadcasting Corp. radio program, Metro Morning, on May 3.

Howard Ferguson, director of Environment Canada's Ontario office, confirmed that the U.S. state department had contacted External Affairs officials in Ottawa with questions about the accuracy of Hallett's comments.

'No accusation'

Michael Elder, a lawyer with the U.S. Department of Justice in Washington, D.C., who defended the clean-up plan in the Buffalo court, said in an interview last week he contacted the CBC news program after receiving a report that Hallett had made incorrect statements.

"The entire focus of our effort was to find exactly what was said. To my knowledge, there was never any accusation or any attempt to discredit Dr. Hallett," Elder said.

"These accusations are absolutely outrageous and false," he said.