

New radioactive sources found in OR, activists say

TDEC, Y-12 refute findings of group

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OAK RIDGE - An activist group said it had identified some new sources of radioactivity in the Oak Ridge environment and suggested official monitoring had become lax.

A state environmental officer, however, took issue with some findings, as well as the group's conclusions.

The RadioActivist Campaign, which is based on the West Coast, said its staff members took samples in November 2004 and, among other things, found elevated levels of strontium-90 in the East Fork Poplar Creek. TRAC said abnormal amounts of strontium were found in clam shells downstream from the Y-12 nuclear weapons plant.

TRAC also said it found radium-226 in a stream in the Oak Ridge's Scarboro community. The group said that radioisotope can be associated with "intense neutron sources" and that it may be evidence of Y-12 producing a new generation of nuclear weapons.

"Each of these positive results is associated with a deficiency of official monitoring," the activist group said in a report released to the news media. TRAC previously released reports on four other Department of Energy sites around the United States.

John Owsley, the state's environmental oversight chief in Oak Ridge, said his staff has monitored East Fork Poplar Creek and has not found significant levels of strontium-90.

Owsley said the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation has found small amounts of strontium in the creek's water, but he said the origin of the material was not clear.

Strontium-90 is a nuclear fission product and not usually associated with Y-12, which makes warhead parts from enriched uranium and other materials.

TRAC said the strontium level in clam shells was 100 times the standard set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Owsley said the EPA standard is a drinking water standard, based on a person drinking two liters a day for a lifetime. He said the group's comparison, using radioactivity found in clam shells, was "unorthodox" and "not consistent with scientific doctrine."

Steven Wyatt, a federal spokesman at Y-12, said there is no production of new weapons taking place at the Oak Ridge plant.

"The plant's primary mission since the end of the Cold War has been to refurbish and maintain nuclear weapons components that are part of the nation's existing stockpile," he said.

Owsley said radium-226 is a naturally occurring radioisotope and a decay product of uranium. He said it was unlikely that levels identified in Scarboro would be affected by groundwater coming from the Y-12 area.

"The hydro-geology just doesn't indicate water moving in that direction," Owsley said. "Our data has not indicated any new source of radium-226."

He said the state has a new environmental monitoring report that hasn't been released publicly. "However, we would point out that our monitoring has not detected any new source of contamination," he said.

TRAC said contaminated streams in Oak Ridge have not been remediated "as claimed" and are not properly marked with warning signs.

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