

Official says study is wrong

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By **Josh Gelin** | *South Carolina Bureau*

AIKEN - A report released Tuesday claiming that an unreported accident at Savannah River Site contaminated surrounding areas is based on faulty findings, an SRS official said.

The report, conducted by The RadioActivist Campaign in coordination with the Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League, said that a radioactive accident, sometime during the year preceding April, increased levels of cesium-137 to more than 50 times the acceptable standard.

Cesium-137, a radioactive byproduct of nuclear fission, was found in dust on pine needles and squirrels' tails, according to the report.

The dust was found northeast and downwind of the site, and a squirrel's tail was found near New Ellenton, just outside the site's entrance, said Norm Buske, who conducted the study.

Mr. Buske concluded that the contamination resulted from a one-time radioactive fallout because dust on the pine needles tested positive for elevated cesium-137 levels but the needles themselves did not - an indication that old growth was not affected by the pollution.

The study, conducted during a week in April, also found levels of cesium-137 that were 1,000 times higher than normal in vegetation in the Lower Three Runs Creek, southeast of the site. Signs of strontium-90 and a trace of cobalt-60, also radioactive byproducts, were found in the stream, the report states.

Mr. Buske said he could not conclusively link the creek contamination with the contamination of the pine needles and squirrels' tails.

SRS officials said that there was no unreported accident in 2002 and that Mr. Buske's findings were inaccurate because he based them on an acceptable level of cesium-137 of 1 picocurie per kilogram.

Scientists at the site said an acceptable level ranges between 500 and 1,000 picocuries, said Will Callicott, the spokesman for Westinghouse Savannah River Co., which runs SRS.

"The conclusions are totally out of step with what's been published and peer reviewed in the scientific literature," he said. "This report appears to have reached a conclusion based on six samples. SRS takes thousands of samples per year and has publicly documented and shared its monitoring results for more than 50 years."

Mr. Buske's study also measured noncontaminated stream vegetation near SRS and compared it with similar vegetation near the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico. Both samples were found to be normal and measured about 1 picocurie, the report says.

"They're just wrong," Mr. Buske said of site officials. "We're sticking to our guns."

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