Activist claims radiation rising

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By the Tri-City Herald staff and news services

A maverick scientist who once sent radioactive jam to Washington's governor claims radiation is on the rise near salmon spawning areas in the Columbia River.

Norm Buske says he's detected radium-225, a decay product of uranium-233, in the Hanford Reach, where 80 percent of the Columbia's fall chinook salmon spawn.

Buske is a Belfair-based independent scientist and Hanford critic who often works with Government Accountability Project, a Washington, D.C.-based public interest group with an office in Seattle.

Over the past decade, his work regularly has sparked controversy, and he has been arrested for trespassing at Hanford.

Scientists from the Hanford nuclear reservation and the state Health Department dispute Buske's current report, published last week with a grant from GAP, an organization of nuclear critics that defends government whistleblowers.

Debra McBaugh, a radiation specialist with the Washington Department of Health, said the sampling methods Buske used in his latest study are nonstandard and have not been reviewed by peers.

"We've been sampling since the 1960s out there. If uranium (or radium) had been there in large amounts, we would have seen it," she said.

Since 2001, Buske has had access to the 586-square-mile Hanford site in an agreement between GAP and the Department of Energy.

Buske's latest report surmises that about 22 pounds of uranium may have been dumped in the Columbia River at old ferry crossings near the defunct D Reactor.

He suspects it was dumped because it contained dangerous fluoride and didn't meet requirements for on-site disposal in tanks or soil.

"There's no proof of that, but radiation patterns in the riverbed suggests it was dumped there," Buske said.

Ted Poston, a senior research scientist with Battelle's Pacific Northwest National Laboratory in Richland, also questioned Buske's theories.

"I like Norm. We need people to question the government. But technically, as a scientist, I can't support his argument," he said. "The notion that someone could dispose of a fuel rod or element in the river is hard to buy."