

Monday, October 27, 2003

Groups Detect Cesium in Area Spring

Radioactivity levels are well below limits and do not pose threat to human health

By JEFF TOLLEFSON | The New Mexican

Nuclear watchdog groups today reported finding trace levels of radioactivity in a spring below White Rock, citing the results as evidence that groundwater contaminated by nuclear work at Los Alamos National Laboratory already is entering into the Rio Grande.

While the levels of cesium-137 are well below regulatory limits and do not pose a danger to human health, the report offers an "early warning" of the potential impacts of groundwater contamination from the lab, according to The Radioactivist Campaign and Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety. Both groups said the issue needs further investigation.

A Los Alamos lab spokesman called the results "highly questionable" and said, even if verified, the alleged presence of cesium in the spring could be explained by worldwide fallout from historical nuclear testing rather than groundwater contamination by the lab itself. Cesium is byproduct of nuclear fission.

The New Mexico Environment Department could not provide any insights regarding the report, but spokesman Jon Goldstein said the department would follow up with its own analysis. Although cesium has turned up in groundwater below the lab, Goldstein said, the state has never found it in springs along the Rio Grande.

"But that doesn't mean these findings aren't true," he said. "We plan to go up there, do our own sampling and see what we find."

Plutonium and other contaminants have been found in surface waters flowing into the Rio Grande, but the lab's computer models indicate that it could take thousands of years for groundwater contamination to percolate into the Rio Grande.

The report isn't the first to question the lab's assumptions regarding the spread of groundwater contamination.

The Environment Department has cited the presence of perchlorate in similar springs along the Rio Grande as possible evidence that groundwater could move much faster than predicted by lab models. Perchlorate is used in explosives, rocket fuel and other industrial processes and was present until recently in discharges from the lab's liquid-radioactive-

waste treatment plant.

The perchlorate detections also remain unresolved, although state and lab tests have shown that minute levels of perchlorate contamination could be common in the region, due to unknown sources.

The Radioactivist Campaign and Concerned Citizens timed their report to coincide with the quarterly meeting of the lab's Groundwater Protection Program, which takes place today at the Courtyard by Marriott in Santa Fe. The regular meeting takes place from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.; presentations for the public are scheduled for 5:15 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.