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Water sample near NTS sparks concern

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Although current information is incomplete, samples taken from one of the 12 Early Warning Drilling Program wells have sparked some alarm due to an initial finding of "higher than acceptable background levels of radioactivity."

Nye County is conducting the drilling program as part of its oversight work on the Yucca Mountain Project. The federally funded program has resulted in the series of wells being drilled south and southwest of the Nevada Test Site.

Final analysis of the water, which is being tested at a Colorado laboratory that has contracted with the county, won't be complete until the middle of next week, according to County Manager Jerry McKnight.

When the EWDP samples were taken, one was sent to the U.S. Geological Survey for independent analysis. McKnight said the Dept. of Energy has been notified of the preliminary results of the Nye tests, and has been advised USGS has a sample from the same well.

The sample was taken from a shallow well adjacent to the "Gate 510" road about halfway between U.S. 95 and the Nevada Test Site entrance in the Amargosa Valley. It is about a mile from the Fort Amargosa market/RV park and Nevada Joe's, a restaurant, bar and brothel.

McKnight said the source of the contamination could very well be from the ground at the site.

"That is a concern since it was an unfiltered water sample with sediment," he said. "There is a concern surface contamination was introduced with the drilling. We need to determine if (the radioactivity) migrated into the water or was just introduced into the water."

And for that reason, McKnight said the county wants only people who have expertise, such as the county's hired consultants, officials from the state's Division of Environmental Protection, and representatives from DOE, on the site.

"We don't want to get people out there who could possibly jeopardize the site or put themselves in jeopardy" before surface testing is conducted, he said. "We don't believe there is anything harmful on the ground, but until a determination is made we will continue our scientific evaluation, and we want others (officials) to be involved in the same thing."

In other words, Nye County is treating the matter as a health and safety issue to the general public and the workers on site. There has not been any indication the water that was sampled has migrated to private wells in Amargosa Valley, McKnight said, adding, "that's why we need to study the hydrology."

"We're looking for where it came from, how it got there, is it moving, or is it stagnant," he said. "If it is in the water and moving we need to know it, and we need to know it quickly."

The sample was taken from a depth of 26 feet, and it's entirely possible it came from an isolated, shallow aquifer, McKnight said. There are numerous levels of clay layers in the valley, and that could mean "there is not a lot of movement" of water in that particular aquifer.

At the same time, the possibility exists the water is moving south and "we've got to do everything we can to determine" if that is the case, McKnight added.

If further testing determines the contamination came from the surface, that could mean it is the result of above ground nuclear tests that were conducted decades ago or it could be the result of "a transportation issue," McKnight said.

He also said people shouldn't be "panicking over the situation" since the safe water standard is "really quite low" at 15 picocuries per liter. A picocurie is one-trillionth of a curie. "All we have (from the laboratory) is a heads up, that there is an anomaly in the test."

But the county also "wants to make sure everyone is aware this is a concern, and that there is heightened activity (at the well site)," McKnight said.

When the complete analysis of the sample is completed, the "anomaly" in the sample will be clearly identified as well as the level of toxicity, if any. The

state and DOE will also provide independent verification of the findings.

Sen. Richard Bryan, a steadfast opponent of the Yucca Mountain Project, called the discovery of radiation in groundwater 25 times above federal drinking water limits "worrisome," and that it "appears to be part of a growing pattern of radioactive migration from the test site."

Bryan also appears to have not been notified how the anomaly was discovered. "If nothing else, this discovery shows the need for independent testing, so that Nevadans do not have to rely solely on the information provided by the Dept. of Energy."

Nye's oversight work is independent of DOE.

McKnight said he is unsure how Bryan and the media determined the amount of radiation in the sample is 25 times above safe drinking water act standards.

"I haven't seen anything in writing that tells me exactly what they came up with," he said. "We do know the reading was in excess of drinking water standards."

He referred to the figure as "somebody's guesstimate of what's there."

Yucca Mountain, located about 15 miles from the well where the sample was collected, is the only site being studied for the permanent storage of 77,000 tons of high-level nuclear waste.