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## State seeks fed funds for nuke water study

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Gov. Kenny Guinn and a Nevada environmental official are urging the U.S. Department of Energy to pour \$40 million more into its ground water program to search for radiation contamination at the Nevada Test Site.

On the federal level, the DOE has asked Congress to approve \$12.7 million for ground water analysis at the Test Site during 2001 and 2002. Another \$21.4 million in contingency funds for the same period was not requested.

"We are still waiting to hear from Energy Secretary Bill Richardson," Guinn's spokesman, Jack Finn, said on Thursday, referring to two letters sent to the secretary, one in December by Guinn and the other by the state on Monday.

The state's latest \$40 million request came in a letter written by Paul Liebendorfer, chief of the Bureau of Federal Facilities.

That amount "is the minimum required" to drill new wells and gather new data to supply enough information to find the extent of radioactive contamination at the Test Site, Liebendorfer said.

The DOE has not gathered enough basic information to satisfy the state, Liebendorfer said in the letter.

Relations between the DOE and the state have been tense over the ground water monitoring program at the Test Site, 65 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

Liebendorfer's letter was sent before Nye County officials revealed on Tuesday that radiation in ground water had been found for the first time outside the Test Site in amounts up to 25 times higher than the federal drinking water standard.

The Nye County test results, if confirmed, could result in an exposure of 375 picocuries of radiation per quart of ground water. In comparison, the National Council on Radiation Protection and Measurements said the average North American eats and drinks about 320 picocuries of uranium a year, depending on soils where food is grown and water is drawn. A curie is a unit of radiation and a picocurie is a trillionth of a curie.

The DOE has estimated that there are 300 million curies of radiation locked in the soils and the ground water at the Test Site from the nuclear weapons experiments.

In 1998 Nye County launched an early-warning drilling program to independently monitor Test Site ground water. The DOE's Yucca Mountain Project gave the county \$3.5 million this year to continue it.

If the DOE ever builds its proposed high-level nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain, Nye County officials reasoned the wells will be ready.

The DOE, the state Division of Health and Nye County performed fresh tests Thursday to verify the single, unfiltered water sample. Both well tests were drawn at 400 feet. The well itself is 499 feet deep. The results are expected next week at the earliest.

The DOE has tested water and milk samples every six months from the area, said DOE spokeswoman Nancy Harkess.

"There has never been anything found in the water or the milk," she said.

And the ground water does not flow toward the Las Vegas Valley, Harkess said.

Ed Goedhart, manager of the Ponderosa Dairy in Amargosa Valley, located between the Las Vegas Valley and the Test Site, said ranchers and farmers are worried.

"We're very concerned," said Goedhart, who heads the largest organic dairy in the state. "It has an impact on every man, woman and child. It even has an impact on Death Valley because that's where the water goes."

The DOE also tests milk at the Pahrump Dairy. Both dairies have a total of 7,000 milking cows.

"I hope it's a false alarm," Goedhart said. "We're hoping that it (the radiation found in the test well) is from natural sources. We're hoping that it might be contamination from the surface."

The U.S. Geological Survey discovered a trace of uranium below 300 feet in a well several feet from the Nye County well, USGS Yucca Mountain chief hydrologist Zel Peterman said.

"That indicates the source is probably naturally occurring uranium which is typical in ground water in the area," Peterman said, noting that the area has some uranium deposits in its volcanic rocks.

State environmental officials have been criticizing the DOE's proposed ground water monitoring plan for more than a year. They said the DOE does not have enough basic information to examine Frenchman Flat, in the southeast corner of the Test Site, where nuclear weapons experiments exploded above ground in the 1950s.