

CTG

Panel to fight mists of time obscuring Hanford releases

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Times staff reporter

A panel of 13 experts will meet tomorrow in Richland to begin putting together a 40-year-old puzzle that still has many of the pieces missing.

The special panel, picked by the Centers for Disease Control, will study whether past releases of radioactivity from the Hanford Nuclear Reservation posed a health threat.

After two days of public testimony, the panel will deliberate and present its findings Friday, which likely will recommend either that further studies be done or that it's pointless to spend more than \$1 million on epidemiological work.

Among the pieces of the puzzle available to the panel are 19,000 pages of previously secret documents about Hanford releases during the 1940s and 1950s when the massive federal complex was new and war-time efforts were at their peak. Hanford was opened in 1943 to

produce plutonium for nuclear weapons.

The panel also will hear testimony from Oregon and Washington state health officials, the three Indian tribes near the 570-square-mile reservation, the Department of Energy, advocacy groups concerned about radioactive emissions from the southeast Washington site and the general public.

Missing, however, from the equation are the people who lived downwind of Hanford and might have suffered from the large radioactive releases in the 1940s. Also lacking is the assurance that the funds will be available to do whatever studies, if any, are recommended.

And, while the panel includes experts on public health studies, nuclear-waste management, health physics, radiation and environmental monitoring, some question whether the group has enough background in the Hanford situation to make an adequate assessment.

"My attitude is wait and see," said

panelist Allen Benson, chemistry instructor at Spokane Falls Community College. "This week could be constructive or obstructive." Benson was a founding member of the Hanford Education Action League, a two-year-old Spokane organization that questions DOE practices at Hanford.

Lincoln Pollisar, associate professor of biostatistics at the University of Washington and epidemiologist with the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, said he was confident the panel would arrive at a consensus.

"There is going to be a lot of facts and information presented vs. all speculation," said Pollisar, adding he hoped the UW could be involved in any future studies.

Dr. Jim Rutterber, of the Centers for Disease Control, the Atlanta-based agency with a worldwide reputation, said this week's preliminary look — at a cost of \$100,000 — is the best way to determine if

more extensive studies are needed.

The DOE has contributed \$60,000 for the study, with state officials expected to foot the remaining bill.

The study was requested by the Washington Nuclear Waste Board, with the states of Oregon, Idaho and Indian tribes involved in the planning. The CDC, a federally funded agency, did a similar study for the Energy Department complex at Savannah River, S.C.

The call for a study came after the release of the federal documents last winter showing that more than 1 million curies of radioactivity have been intentionally or accidentally discharged from the site near the Columbia River.

In contrast, 15 curies of radioactive iodine was released from Three Mile Island, the worst commercial reactor disaster in U.S. history.

A separate study is under way by the nine-member Hanford Historical Documents Review Committee, with three

representatives each from the states of Washington, Oregon and affected Indian tribes.

Among the topics to be addressed by the CDC panel, headed by Dr. Glyn Caldwell of Arizona, a cancer epidemiologist who has conducted research on health effects of nuclear-weapons testing:

■ A study of previous epidemiological studies funded by the DOE.

■ Assessment of environmental monitoring programs used at the federal complex, and whether they should be increased.

■ Look at the need and establish priorities for additional epidemiological studies.

■ Review data concerning past radioactive releases from Hanford.

■ The need for a central tumor registry, to enable the state to track cancer cases.

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