

Cover-up of Hanford's effect on public health charged

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By Michael Murphey
Staff writer

A Spokane physician voiced suspicions Friday that studies of the effect of Hanford radiation on human health in Eastern Washington have been conducted, but are being kept secret by the Department of Energy.

In light of the extensive environmental monitoring the DOE claims to do around the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, Dr. Bruce Amundson said he finds it difficult to believe it has never tried to find out how radiation from the reservation has affected area residents.

"It really seems incongruous to me," Amundson said, "that extensive monitoring of the environment, of wildlife and of plants has taken place, but nothing has been done involving the human population over the past 40 years."

Amundson, a representative of Physicians for Social Responsibility, made his remarks at a discussion on

Human Health and Hanford during the Washington State Medical Association's annual meeting being held in Spokane this week.

Dr. Keith Price, a biologist with Battelle Northwest Laboratories who is responsible for environmental monitoring at the Hanford reservation, denied the allegation.

"I have not found anything suggesting any epidemiological studies have been done and the data not reported," Price responded. "If I was aware of information that had been held back or covered indicating Hanford represented a danger to me, my wife and four children, I wouldn't be here. I'm not stupid."

The Friday morning debate was an example of what is becoming a familiar argument between Hanford officials and Hanford critics who claim the nuclear reservation represents a significant health hazard to the people of Eastern Washington.

That debate has been even more vigorous since the revelation earlier this year that releases of huge doses

of radiation — some accidental and some intentional — in the 1940s and 1950s were kept secret from the public.

Amundson suggested it is almost as bad to admit there have been no epidemiological studies as it would be for studies to have been conducted and their results kept secret.

"Why, when there have been these known major releases in the past," he asked, "has no one initiated significant epidemiological work in the past 20 years? That is something (Hanford officials) must be held accountable for."

During the morning-long session, a group of Hanford representatives took the position that there is no evidence that Hanford represents any significant health hazard to the rest of Eastern Washington.

Amundson and the other Hanford opponents argued that the nuclear reservation represents a grave threat to the health and environment of the region.

They contend that the DOE has participated in a

cover-up up of information regarding that threat, and has manipulated safety standards to favor the economic needs of the nuclear industry at the expense of public health.

"I think it's reasonable to assume Hanford may be the No. 1 public health issue of our region in the coming decade," Amundson said.

Ron Gerton, director of safety at Hanford, dismissed those contentions saying if the danger was that great, the results already would be obvious.

"If the doom was as great as has been indicated," Gerton said, "the evidence would be overwhelming. After all, we've been operating out there for 40 years."

In another portion of the Friday morning presentation, Dr. John Halseil, a Spokane radiologist, called for the shutdown of the N Reactor at Hanford based on its similarities to the reactor that caused the Chernobyl disaster in the Soviet Union. That disaster, he said, eventually will be responsible for 35,000 deaths in the

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The N Reactor produces electricity for the region and plutonium for the construction of nuclear weapons.

"Why we need the N Reactor at all escapes me," Halsell said.

He said there is a surplus of electricity in the Northwest, and there is enough weapons-grade plutonium to produce all the nuclear weapons the government wants to build for the next three years.

He said nuclear reactors operated for defense purposes are not subjected to the same safety standards as reactors which only produce nuclear power "because they cost less to build" if you don't meet the standards. He said he doubts the United States is any better equipped to respond to a nuclear plant disaster than was the Soviet Union.

"We should cease operation of the N Reactor," Halsell said. "All defense reactors should be required to meet the same safety standards as commercial power plants, and the Washington State Medical Association should be a leader in establishing an adequate public safety response to nuclear accidents."

Gerton responded that since the Chernobyl disaster, six separate reviews of the N Reactor have been conducted and have shown that "a Chernobyl-type accident cannot and will not occur in this country."

"The similarities between the Cherbobyl and the N Reactor are not nearly as significant as the differences," Gerton said. "All of the studies have concluded so far that it is safe for us to continue operation of the N Reactor as we have been doing."

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