

No conflict in findings at Hanford

'It's not misleading,' plant official states

By Lonnie Rosenwald
Staff writer

RICHLAND — Hanford's top official praised a panel studying the site's health effects Friday and promised to cooperate in health studies the group recommended.

At the same time, the U.S. Department of Energy's Hanford operations manager, Michael Lawrence, denied the panel's findings conflict with Hanford's insistence it has never observed health problems caused by site activities.

"Based on our review of the workers, we have not observed any health effects. It's not misleading," Lawrence said at a press conference.

But he acknowledged Hanford's studies have covered its own workers, not nearby residents.

Earlier in the day, the national panel of 13 scientists recommended further study of suspected thyroid disease among those residents. The panel said disease might have resulted from Hanford radiation releases in the 1940s and 1950s.

A panel member called the releases of iodine-131 "extraordinarily unusual" and potentially high enough to cause illness.

The panel was convened by the federal Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, at the request of the state Nuclear Waste Board. The board was responding to concerns of residents who live downwind of Hanford and claim a higher than normal incidence of cancer.

The panel recommended either a case comparison study, in which people with disease are looked at to determine their exposure to radiation, or a cohort study, in which the exposed population is examined for its disease rate.

The first study could cost about \$300,000 and the second at least \$1 million, panel chairman Glyn Caldwell said.

The panel also called for expanded monitoring of Hanford workers and the nuclear site's surroundings.

The Hanford Historical Documents Review Committee, a body of Washington, Oregon and Indian officials, will meet in Portland Oct. 30 to consider the recommendations. It then will suggest action to the states.

Royce Filby, head of the documents committee, said the panel recommendations for thyroid exposure and disease studies "are two concerns I think ultimately we'll start to look at immediately."

Lawrence said DOE will wait for Filby's committee to meet before taking any action.

"The department is going to work cooperatively with the states and the many other jurisdictions," he said.

"We find the report to be technically sound and believe the consensus of the panel . . . is supportive of our current programs here on environmental protection and on safety."

But Lawrence warned most of the panel's concerns "deal with the past . . . That's going to be a difficult thing to assess."

He refused to note some specific objections he said DOE has.

Lawrence also hinted DOE isn't willing to foot the whole bill for further health studies.

"We have a responsibility to pursue some of these things and we're going to take a responsible position in doing so."

"I think the state shares a responsibility. Whether or not that extends to completely funding or kicking in a major, a reasonable percentage of the dollars, I don't know."

But Filby said the state can't afford the studies and will ask DOE to pay for them.

"The problem has arisen as a result of Department of Energy activities," he contended.

The state and DOE fought over who would pay for the national panel, and ended up essentially splitting the tab.

The iodine releases first were disclosed by DOE in February, after prodding from public interest groups.

Iodine reaches and collects in the thyroid through milk produced by cows that graze on contaminated grass. It may cause cancer.

However, knowledge about the effects of ingested iodine on the

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thyroid is sketchy, according to several panel members.

Panel member Allen Benson, a Spokane Falls Community College chemistry professor and environmental activist, said studies have estimated thyroid damage occurs in adults from a dose above 20-30 rems.

"It looks like it's credible that certain people would be in jeopardy," he said of the Hanford releases, which resulted in doses of up to 2,300 rems to infants in Pasco according to state officials.

The panel said "the highest priority" should be to develop a system to determine the rate of thyroid disease among residents downwind of Hanford. Benson said the studies wouldn't extend as far as Spokane.

It also recommended a "health surveillance system" be created in Washington, Oregon and Idaho to collect information from hospital discharge records, tumor registries, health insurance records and other sources to monitor health effects of Hanford.

It said DOE should expand its existing studies of Hanford workers to include military and construction workers, and develop a system to track workers after they leave the site.

Lawrence called the latter "a good recommendation which we're going to pursue."

It called for greater state involvement in environmental monitoring and asked DOE to maintain an open file of accidental and intentional radiation releases.

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