

The Community Environmental Monitoring Program: Reducing Public Perception of Risk through Stakeholder Involvement

Between 1951 and 1992, 928 nuclear tests were conducted at the Nevada Test Site (NTS), including 100 atmospheric and 828 underground tests. Initial public reaction to the tests was largely supportive, but by the late 1950s this began to change, largely as a result of fear of the potential for adverse health effects to be caused by exposure to ionizing radiation resulting from the tests. The nuclear power plant accident at Three Mile Island in 1979 served to heighten these fears, as well as foster a general distrust of the federal agencies involved and low public confidence in monitoring results.

Modeled after a similar program that involved the public in monitoring activities around the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant, the Community Environmental Monitoring Program (CEMP) has promoted stakeholder involvement, awareness, and understanding of radiological surveillance in communities surrounding the NTS since 1981. It involves stakeholders in the operation, data collection, and dissemination of information obtained from a network of 29 stations across a wide area of Nevada, Utah, and California. It is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy, National Nuclear Security Administration Nevada Site Office (NNSA/NSO) and administered by the Desert Research Institute (DRI) of the Nevada System of Higher Education. Since assuming administration of the program in 2000, DRI has accomplished significant enhancements to the network's data collection and transmission capabilities. A robust datalogging and communications system allows for the near real-time transmission of data to a platform maintained by DRI's Western Regional Climate Center, where the data are uploaded and displayed on a publicly accessible web site (<http://cemp.dri.edu/>). Additionally, the CEMP can serve as part of an emergency response network in the event of an unplanned radiological release from the NTS, and also provides an excellent platform for testing new environmental sensor technologies. Finally, the CEMP provides training workshops for involved stakeholders, and educational programs, which help to alleviate public perception of risk of health effects from past activities conducted at the NTS.