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Here are three stories on the tritium contamination - Chicago Tribune, the Chicago NBC-TV affiliate, and the Joliet Herald-News. Two other newspapers which covered the news briefing, the Kankakee Daily Journal and the Morris Daily Herald are afternoon newspapers.

Chicago Tribune  
Jan. 26, 2006

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chi-0601260133jan26,1,675767.story?coll=chi-newslocal-hed>

Exelon admits its fault in leak  
Apologetic officials call risk minimal

By Hal Dardick and Michael Hawthorne  
Tribune staff reporters  
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Exelon Corp. officials said Wednesday that they should have acted much sooner after millions of gallons of water containing radioactive material spilled in 1998 and 2000 outside the company's nuclear plant in Braidwood.

"We should have done better," said Thomas O'Neill, Exelon Nuclear's vice president of regulatory affairs. "This is a black eye for Exelon Nuclear. We are not happy about this.

"We put tritium into the ground in a place where it is not supposed to be," he said. "We acknowledge our failing in that regard, and we are going to fix it and make it right."

But other Exelon officials and a consultant downplayed the risk posed to local residents by the spills.

Daily drinking of groundwater from one contaminated drinking well would increase a person's typical annual exposure to radioactivity from normal eating and drinking by less than 1 percent, said Eli Port, a certified health physicist hired by Exelon to explain the risk.

Tritium, a form of radioactive water, is a natural byproduct of a nuclear plant's operation. Braidwood had a permit to discharge it through a 5-mile long "blowdown line" that ends at the Kankakee River.

By the time it flows into the river, its radioactivity is below the level deemed dangerous by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in groundwater, said Phil Harvey, a hydrologist who is a consultant to Exelon Nuclear.

But vacuum valves on the blowdown line failed in 1998 and 2000, each

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time spilling about 3 million gallons of effluent onto the ground outside the plant. Those spills were northeast of the plant, near Smiley Road, between Center Street and Cemetery Road in Reed Township in Will County, officials said.

The owner of a pond and surrounding property that extends into that area has accepted Exelon's buyout offer. Exelon has pledged to cover any property value losses at 14 other privately owned properties in the area.

The company also has offered to test 28 other private wells in the area. "We don't expect to find anything," said Craig Nesbit, Exelon Nuclear's spokesman.

In 1998, "there was nothing done ... to remediate the leak," O'Neill said. In 2000 tritium-tainted water was pumped from the site, he said.

The Illinois EPA first learned about the spills last March when a local official asked for an investigation, said Maggie Carson, EPA spokeswoman.

The agency urged Exelon to drill monitoring wells and the elevated tritium levels were found and reported to the EPA in November, at the same time they were reported to the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Exelon informally told commission officials about the spills when they happened, but no formal notification was filed. The filing wasn't required because it was assumed no radioactive substances were released into the environment, said Jan Strasma, a commission spokesman.

Through its monitoring wells, Exelon last year found groundwater on its property with tritium levels of more than 11 times higher than the federal limit, according to the commission.

In an area of about 1,000 square feet near the site of the spills, levels exceeded the federal limit, Exelon officials said. But it exceeded the normal "background" levels in a much wider area, mostly spreading north from the spill site.

Exelon has tested 14 private wells, and 13 showed tritium levels no higher than normal. In one well, the tritium level was nearly eight times higher than normal, but well below the federal limit.

Drinking two liters of water a day from that well would increase a person's annual radioactivity ingestion from normal eating and drinking by less than 1 percent, Port said.

O'Neill said Exelon also tested groundwater for other radioactive substances. "We found that there is nothing else there," he said.

Tritium can enter the body through ingestion, inhalation or skin absorption. At high levels, it can cause cancer, birth defects and genetic damage, said Paul Gunter, director of the Reactor Watchdog Project at the Nuclear Information & Resource Service, a Washington, D.C.-based anti-nuclear organization.

Gunter's group joined 22 organizations and six individuals Wednesday in petitioning the regulatory commission to demand more information about alleged radioactive leaks at Braidwood and six other nuclear plants, including Exelon's Dresden nuclear plant near Morris in Grundy County. "This is an industrywide problem," Gunter said.

Exelon, meanwhile, is working with the state EPA to come up with a remediation plan, O'Neill said.

The company also has launched an internal probe "to determine how it happened and why it happened," with the goal of ensuring it never occurs again, O'Neill said. Exelon quit sending tritium through the blowdown line in November, he said.

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WMAQ-TV (NBC) Chicago  
Jan. 25, 2006

<http://www.nbc5.com/news/6435963/detail.html>

Exelon Offers Buoyouts Near Power Plant

High Radiation Levels Found Following Leak

POSTED: 1:32 pm CST January 25, 2006  
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BRACEVILLE, Ill. -- A Will County nuclear power plant is negotiating financial deals with 15 nearby property owners after elevated levels of a radioactive substance were discovered near the site of a 1998 pipeline valve break.

Recent environmental tests at more than 200 sites on plant property and on private land around Exelon Corp.'s Braidwood Generating Plant indicate there's no health or safety threat to the area, Exelon spokesman Craig Nesbit said.

Even so, NBC5's Anita Padilla reported Wednesday that Exelon wants to buy 14 properties around the power plant.

According to The Associated Press, the company has agreed to buy out one property owner and compensate 14 others for any lost property value.

"We don't want these people to suffer any harm for something we did," Nesbit said Tuesday. "We will make them whole."

On Monday, someone from Exelon Nuclear came by Regina Sikic's home to test her water. They were testing her neighbor's well water, too, Padilla said.

"My heart did kind of sink," Sikic said. "You're thinking, there's got to be something wrong if they are that scared to be looking at everybody's property and testing everybody's water, there's got to be a problem," she said.

The problem was an underground pipe on the north side of the plant. A broken valve had caused several million gallons of water containing tritium to leak out. Tritium emits low levels of radiation.

The incident happened in 1988, but it wasn't discovered until November 2005, Padilla said.

"We've sampled the ground and we know where this tritium is in the ground (and) we know where it is not," said Exelon Vice President Thomas O'Neill. "We know where it's going and we're going to take steps to keep people ... well informed."

The good news, Padilla said, is that the problem is fixable.

Company officials say one landowner has agreed to a buyout of his property, and even though the other properties have tested negative, the buyout offer still stands.

Exelon announced this week that it is also offering free well tests to 28 property owners who live next to the five-mile pipeline.

In November, higher than normal tritium levels were found near the site of the valve break that allowed several million gallons of water being pumped from the plant to the Kankakee River to escape on plant property, about 60 miles southwest of Chicago.

One well on Exelon's property showed tritium levels more than 11 times higher than the federal limit for groundwater, according to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. Tritium is commonly found in groundwater but is more concentrated in water used in nuclear reactors.

So far, tritium levels have been below unhealthy limits defined by the federal government.

The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency has cited Exelon for two violations of the state's groundwater standards and given the company until Feb. 3 to file a report about the tritium plume. Nesbit said the company has drilled 158 monitoring wells to determine how it has spread.

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Exelon wants tract near valve break

• Elevated tritium levels found: But officials say these do not pose any health threat

By Kim Smith  
STAFF WRITER

BRACEVILLE — Exelon officials are negotiating the purchase of a nearly 20-acre tract near the site of a 1998 pipeline valve break.

Yet they say there are no potential health threats caused by an elevated level of tritium found in November near the site of the valve break. They claim the pipeline has been tested and no problems were found.

"We are in negotiations with one property owner and have sent out 15 letters offering compensation to others for any lot property values lost because of what Exelon has done," said Neal Miller, spokesman for the Exelon Nuclear Braidwood Station. "This is not a buyout."

Tritium is a naturally occurring isotope of hydrogen that emits a low level of radiation and is a natural part of water. It is found in more concentrated levels in water used in nuclear reactors. High exposures to tritium may increase the risk of developing cancer. As a precaution, Exelon recently agreed to test the drinking water of 28 property owners who live next to the 5-mile pipeline on Smiley Road. The pipeline discharges into the Kankakee River.

Exelon has twice been cited for violations of the state's groundwater standards by the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, which has given the company until Feb. 3 to file a report on how to deal with the problem.

Exelon has drilled more than 100 test wells in order to track the problem. Higher-than-normal levels were discovered in one test well. Miller said the well was not used for drinking water.

Eli Port of RSSI, a radiation protection consulting firm, said the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has established an upper limit for tritium concentration in drinking water of 20,000 picocuries per liter.

"You get the same amount of radiation exposure on an airplane flight across the country," Port said. "I would drink this water. I would let my family drink this water."

Exelon has a private meeting scheduled with homeowners today to openly discuss the contamination.

"We do not want them to think we can afford to buy them all out," Miller said.

Yet, Godley Park District Executive Director Joe Cosgrove feels not enough investigation has been done. He has been busy gathering a lot of information he plans to release to the public at a meeting at 7 p.m. Feb. 7 at the Godley Community Center.

"I feel people have the right to know everything," Cosgrove said. "This problem should have been taken care of eight years ago."

Godley filed a contamination lawsuit in 2002 after oil spilled over from Exelon properties into neighbors' yards.

Afterwards, the state sampled 42 drinking water wells in Godley and claimed there were no contaminants found.

It will take about two weeks for the results from the 28 wells tested to be received.

**From:** Jan Strasma  
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