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From: Jan Strasma
To: Raeann Shane; Thomas Combs
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Subject: Congressional interest in Braidwood contamination
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Release

The news article below mentions that Rep. Weller plans to meet with the NRC staff next week on the Braidwood tritium contamination. Have we heard anything about this?

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Tainted water in Will preserve
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By Hal Dardick
Tribune staff reporter

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More radioactive tritium than is allowed under federal standards has been found in a Will County nature preserve, Exelon Nuclear officials said Thursday.

The finding comes about a month after the company announced that groundwater on private property outside the Braidwood Generating Station contained tritium at levels above the limit set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Forest Preserve District Executive Director Mike Pasteris announced the latest findings, also in groundwater, at a meeting in Joliet, and Exelon Nuclear spokesman Craig Nesbit confirmed them.

At the meeting, County Board Chairman James Moustis (R-Frankfort) questioned why Exelon Nuclear did not publicly disclose the tritium spills--the first of which occurred in 1998--that led to the contamination until early December. "What else can you think, but they covered it up?" Moustis asked.

Nesbit said the company is conducting an internal investigation, but so far, there is no indication of a cover-up. He echoed statements made last week by company officials that the spills should have been made public much sooner.

"We absolutely should have, and there's no good reason why we didn't," he said.

Moustis, meanwhile, said he wants to ensure such delayed notification never again occurs. To that end, he sent a letter to state and federal legislators in which he questioned the actions of Exelon, as well as the state and federal agencies that regulate the nuclear power industry.

"While this was an accident," he wrote, "there was no justification for the failed response.

"I am extremely concerned that the company waited for so long before it acted. At the same time, we must ask why the NRC [U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission], the state EPA and the Illinois Department of Nuclear Safety didn't require a faster response to the incident."

U.S. Rep. Jerry Weller (R-Ill.), whose district includes the nuclear plant, plans to meet next week with Exelon and NRC officials to discuss the situation, said Chris Kennedy, his spokesman.

State Sen. Gary Dahl (R-Peru), whose district also includes the plant, said the public should have been notified far earlier. "If they knew about it, the public should have known about it the very next day," he said.

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The Senate staff is looking over regulations to determine whether new legislation is needed to make sure hazardous spills of any kind are immediately made public, Dahl said.

Exelon Nuclear and its predecessor, Commonwealth Edison, told NRC officials about two tritium spills when they occurred in 1998 and 2000, but a formal report wasn't required because it was assumed no radioactive substances were released into the environment, said Jan Strasma, an NRC spokesman.

In each case, about 3,000 gallons of water escaped from vacuum breakers that malfunctioned just east of the plant. The vacuum breakers are on a 5-mile blowdown line that carries tritium, a byproduct of nuclear generation, from the plant to the Kankakee River.

Though the water leaves the plant with high tritium concentrations that exceed federal limits, the levels fall below limits by the time the water enters the river, Exelon officials said.

To determine the extent of the contamination, Exelon Nuclear in recent months drilled more than 150 monitoring wells along the blowdown line. The company asked the Forest Preserve District for permission to drill in the preserves in late December, Pasteris said.

In the Braidwood Dunes and Savanna Nature Preserve northwest of Smiley and Essex Roads, tritium levels in two monitoring wells about 150 feet northeast of a vacuum breaker exceed the federal limit, in one case by up to 50 percent, Nesbit said.

Pasteris said there are no drinking wells on the property, and Nesbit said the closest homes were 900 feet to the west, opposite the direction in which groundwater flows.

In August 2003, Exelon Nuclear workers discovered a vacuum breaker near the site of contamination spilling a gallon of effluent each minute, Nesbit said.

Exelon Nuclear officials were looking through records to see if that leak was reported to state or federal agencies, he said.

In Sand Ridge Savanna Nature Preserve, northeast of Smiley and Essex, one of 11 monitoring wells showed tritium levels as much as 13 times higher than what would normally be expected in nature, but well below federal limits, Nesbit said. Why the levels are higher there is not known, he added.

Company officials last week said they found tritium groundwater levels above federal limits in an area of about 1,000 square feet along Smiley between Cemetery Road and Center Street. Above-normal tritium levels were found in a wider area, mostly to the north.

Exelon also tested 14 private wells, and 13 showed normal tritium levels. One 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 above normal eating and drinking by less than 1 percent, an Exelon consultant said.

Tritium can enter the body through ingestion, inhalation and skin absorption. Exposure can increase the risk of cancer, birth defects and genetic damage, but the EPA considers it one of the least dangerous radioactive substances, in part because it leaves the body relatively quickly.

The state EPA first learned about the 2000 spill last March, when a local official asked for an investigation, a spokeswoman said. The agency urged Exelon to drill the wells, Maggie Carson said.

Exelon told the state EPA about the 1998 spill in late November, the same day it reported the contamination to the NRC, she said.

A public forum is set for 7 p.m. Tuesday in the Godley Park District gym, 500 S. Kankakee St., Godley.

Exelon has established a Web site on the issue at braidwoodtritium.info.

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