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Radioactive soil buried by FP in unpublicized spill last M

The March spill was labeled a "reportable occurrence" by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission — a classification less serious than an "accident."

Radioactive soil buried by Dirt contaminated in unpublicized spill

TOM DUBOCC
Miami News Reporter

An unpublicized spill of 11,027 gallons of radioactive water occurred at the Turkey Point nuclear power plant in South Dade March 17. The spill contaminated 2,500 cubic feet of soil, which then was buried at the complex near Biscayne Bay.

The dirt was added to Turkey Point's "radioactive protection area," which now contains 41,000 cubic feet of contaminated soil, according to Florida Power & Light Co. spokesman Tony Bruns. The other contaminated soil came from a 1978 spill, Bruns said.

Eleven thousand gallons of water would fill a small swimming pool.

Commission public affairs officer Joe Gilliland said the agency approved the burial of contaminated soil after determining that the levels of radioactivity were safe for burial.

Gilliland and Bruns said the burial site poses no hazard to Turkey Point's residential neighbors, to groundwater or to nearby Biscayne Bay.

Local anti-nuclear activist Joette Lorion disagreed.

"They're doing something that could do a great deal of harm," Lorion said. She criticized the utility for taking a "kitty litter approach" to radioactive soil disposal.

"A hurricane would be a disaster. Any kind of flooding could bring the radioactivity into the groundwater and into the bay."

Lorion is one of the leading anti-nuclear activists here. She is party to an active federal lawsuit seeking to shut down Turkey Point, saying it's unsafe.

The federal commission approved the burial in May. The soil contains "low levels of radioactivity," according to Gilliland, who said, "You need to keep it

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The federal commission approved the burial in May. The soil contains "low levels of radioactivity," according to Gilliland, who said, "You need to keep it

segregated, but there is no health threat."

Brun said the soil's radioactivity is "less than that in a chest X-ray."

The contamination was determined to be within safe levels by radiation control experts at the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services — so long as it's kept within Turkey Point.

HRS health physicist Jerry Eakins said the state has no say in what FP&L buries at Turkey Point. "If it was up to the State of Florida and FP&L wanted to take it

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to a
landfill (outside the Turkey Point complex), we would not allow them to do it," Alkens said. "We would require them to take it to a burial ground out of state."

By burying the material, Bruns said, FP&L avoided the \$1.6 million cost of shipping it to a nuclear waste dump in South Carolina — an expense that would have been passed on to FP&L customers.

He said FP&L also saved customers' money by not publicizing the spill of radioactive contaminated water. The spill was not serious enough to warrant an announcement, he said. Gilliland said FP&L was required to report the spill to the NRC, but was not required to inform the media.

"NRC requires that every time a plant belches, it has to go into some kind of a report," Bruns said. "If we did a media release on each one, my God, the reams of paper work and the amount of time would be astronomical. It would be a waste of customers' money to go to the trouble of informing the media of every insignificant occurrence."

According to Gilliland and Bruns, the March 17 spill was caused when a valve was mistakenly left open during routine maintenance of one of the plant's nuclear fuel "cavities." As a result, 11,027 gallons of water contaminated with radioactive cesium and cobalt overflowed from a storage tank, pouring onto the ground and into Turkey Point's storm drains.

A similar occurrence happened in September 1978 at Turkey Point. About 4,000 gallons of contaminated water spilled when a storage pool overflowed.

The contaminated water from the March 17 occurrence was trapped and the drainage system was cleaned. With the NRC's approval in May, the 2,500 cubic feet of radioactive soil was buried eight to 10 feet underground and covered with macadam. The 100 by 100 foot site, which also contains contaminated soil from the 1978 spill, is fenced off at the southeast corner of the Turkey Point complex.

Bruns said it would take "hundreds of years" for seepage from the soil to reach groundwater — and by that time, the soil's radioactive elements would have decayed.

Hydrological studies commissioned by FP&L show that any seepage would "migrate" to the Turkey Point nuclear generators' cooling canals, where any radioactivity would be detected before it reached Biscayne Bay, according to Bruns.

The March 17 spill occurred the day after a mock disaster drill was staged at Turkey Point to rehearse evacuation of the surrounding area.