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RADIOACTIVE WATER FOUND AT PALO VERDE

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Arizona Public Service Co. discovered radioactive water near a maze of underground pipes at the Palo Verde Nuclear Generating Station this week and plans more tests to ensure that the tainted water hasn't leaked into the area's water supply.

Work crews discovered the tritium-laced water in an underground pipe vault near Palo Verde's Unit 3. Tests confirmed that the water contains more than three times the acceptable amount of tritium.

State officials say there is no immediate evidence that the tritium, a byproduct of nuclear power generation and a relatively weak source of radiation, poses any public health concerns.

"At this point, we don't have any reason to believe there has been any impact on the groundwater," said Steve Owens, director of the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality.

The Phoenix-based utility on Thursday notified the Department of Environmental Quality and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission of its discovery. Now, the utility will work with state and federal officials to pinpoint the source of the contaminated water and determine how far it has spread.

The Department of Environmental Quality will test soil and water at and near the plant in Wintersburg, about 50 miles west of downtown Phoenix. Aquifers about 70 feet and 200 feet underground supply water for the area.

Owens said the nearest public well is at a Wintersburg general store about three miles from the plant. Some homeowners operate private wells closer to the plant. On Wednesday, Palo Verde officials will conduct a public meeting at the plant for nearby residents, who will be notified about the time.

Craig Seaman, APS' director of regulatory affairs, said Palo Verde work crews on Tuesday discovered a small

amount of water that appeared to leak into the pipe vault. Crews dug a 13-foot ditch, collected samples and conducted tests Wednesday that confirmed the presence of tritium.

Palo Verde crews discovered no evidence of contamination during past inspections at the plant's aquifers and wells. More tests are being conducted, and initial samples show no signs of tritium, Seaman said.

Although a leaking pipe may be the source of the tritium, Seaman said APS could not rule out other sources. According to the plant's operating permit, tritium can be released into the air.

Tritium can be ingested or absorbed in human tissue. Small amounts of tritium pass through the body quickly, usually through urine.

Exposure to tritium can increase the risk of cancer and birth defects.

Several nuclear power plants around the country have reported tritium leaks.

In Illinois, Exelon pledged to help build a new public water system for a small township after tritium was discovered in groundwater and at least one private well.

CAPTION: Palo Verde Nuclear Generating Station

---- INDEX REFERENCES ---

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