

P.8 Tritium Contamination at the Hanford Installation: Are We Doing a Good Job Communicating the Risk?

Sally O'Connor
soconnor@xula.edu; Tel. 504-483-7506
Xavier University of Louisiana
1 Drexel Drive
New Orleans, LA 70125

Abstract

The radioisotope tritium was found to be leaking into the Columbia River at the Department of Energy's (DOE) installation in eastern Washington. The former nuclear production facility generated large volumes of wastes that were disposed of in pits and trenches during the early part of the Cold War era. Seepage of radioactive wastes into the underlying groundwater and eventually into the river has been monitored by various wells for a number of decades now.

Recently, increased amounts of tritium were found in samples collected from monitoring wells. Other than what is reported in the local news media, there has not been a focused effort to educate the public on the risk (or non-risk) of drinking and/or recreational use of the Columbia River. This poster paper will present data on publics' understanding of risk over a ten-year period from 1989 to the present.

Xavier University's Consortium for Environmental Risk Evaluation (CERE) Program collected and catalogued over 5300 documents published between 1989 to 1999 expressing citizens' views related to the Hanford installation. CERE has captured a picture of stakeholders' concerns that have been voiced in many forums, including public meetings, newspaper articles, editorials, journals, and letters. The end of the Cold War in 1989 forced Hanford, like many of DOE's installations, to become more open about past practices and current activities. This allowed information on tritium contamination to become known, and the public responded with interest and concern. This paper presents an analysis of citizens' concerns regarding tritium production and contamination, and makes suggestions on how federal agencies can better respond to citizens' concerns and implement a more effective public participation process.