Largest radioactive spill in U.S. history on Navajo Nation recalled

By Talli Nauman
Native Sun News
Health & Environment Editor
June 30, 2016
http://www.nsweekly.com/news/2016-06-29/Top_News/Largest_radioactive_spill_in_US_history_on_Navajo_.html

United Nuclear Corp.'s uranium mill tailings spill at Church Rock in the Navajo Nation, the largest radioactive materials release in U.S. history, resulted in a Superfund site, prompting members of the Diné Nation to testify about being denied equal access to quality drinking water for decades. COURTESY/Lea Rekow

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Anticipating that "a large scale radiation contamination incident could impact the United States," the EPA is giving the public until July 25 to comment on proposed guidelines for emergency drinking water safety.

The guidelines, or Protective Action Guides (PAGs) are supposed to "help federal, state, local, tribal officials and public water systems make decisions about use of water during radiological emergencies."

The EPA "seeks to balance the goal of keeping radiation doses as low as possible with the practical and logistical challenges of providing alternative drinking water during the response to a disaster."

The agency's proposal adds recommendations to the ones in place since 2013, with a goal of prioritizing protection for infants, children and pregnant or nursing women – in other words, people "in the most sensitive life stages," it says.

In cases in which first responders must decide how to allocate a water supply compromised by a radiation contamination event, the guidelines suggest relaxing

lower-risk population members' radiation levels in water five times more than the more sensitive population in the event that a scarcity of high quality water arises.

One such event was United Nuclear Corp.'s uranium mill tailings spill at Church Rock in the Navajo Nation, where some 94 million gallons of radioactive liquid broke the dam of an evaporation pond, washing into the Rio Puerco channel, which carried it downstream past Gallup, New Mexico, and all the way to Winslow, Ariz.

Documented as the largest radioactive materials release in U.S. history, the disaster 37 years ago, in July 1979, resulted in a Superfund site, prompting members of the Diné from the nearby Red Water Pond Road Community to testify in April 2016 to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights about being denied equal access to quality drinking water for decades.

The EPA stresses that its guidelines are "not legally binding" and "are not intended to define safe or unsafe levels of exposure or contamination." They are to be used at the complete discretion of authorities, as needed, and they do not supersede the Safe Drinking Water Act's established maximum contaminant levels for radiological material in drinking water during normal exposure periods.

Under that act, the National Primary Drinking Water Regulations for radionuclides are based on lifetime exposure criteria and assume 70 years of continued exposure to contaminants in drinking water, which EPA considers "may not provide the necessary tools to assist emergency responders with determining the need for an immediate protective action."

Watchdogs of the nuclear industry and regulatory agencies decry the suggestion of raising acceptable levels of exposure for any cohort of the population even under emergency conditions. The critics consider the idea to be a way of relaxing protection against health risks from radiation.

In a written statement calling the proposal "shocking" and "egregious," they note that the new guidelines would permit radiation exposures equivalent to 250 chest X-rays a year.

The guidelines would allow the general population to drink water hundreds to thousands of times more radioactive than is now legal, according to the non-profits Physicians for Social Responsibility and the Nuclear Information and Resource Service, or NIRS.

For example, radioactive iodine-131 has an exposure limit of 3 pico-curies per liter (pCi/L) in water, but the new guidelines recommend allowing 10,350 (pCi/L), which is 3,450 times higher. For strontium-90, which causes leukemia, the limit is 8 pCi/L; the proposed alternative is 7,400 pCi/L, a 925-fold increase.

"Clean Water is essential for health. Just like lead, radiation when ingested in small amounts is very hazardous to our health," said Catherine Thomasson, executive director of Physicians for Social Responsibility.
"It is inconceivable that EPA could now quietly propose allowing enormous increases in radioactive contamination with no action to protect the public, even if concentrations are a thousand times higher than under the Safe Drinking Water Act," she said.

Although babies, children, and females are at even greater risk than adult males for health problems due to radiation, all radionuclides can cause cancer as well as other health and reproductive problems. "There is no completely safe level," her organization states.

Internal EPA documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act show that the EPA concluded that the proposed recommendations "would exceed maximum contaminant limits of the Safe Drinking Water Act by a factor of 100, 1,000, and in two instances, 7 million," it said.

The EPA internal analysis showed that for one radionuclide, "drinking a very small glass of water of approximately 4 ounces ... would result in an exposure that corresponds to a lifetime of drinking ... water ... at the MCL level."

"All of this is extraordinary, since EPA has recently accepted the National Academy of Sciences' most current risk estimates for radiation, indicating radiation is considerably more dangerous per unit dose than previously believed," Diane D'Arrigo, on behalf of the Nuclear Information and Resource Service.

"Pushing allowable concentrations of radioactivity in drinking water up orders of magnitude above the longstanding Safe Drinking Water Act levels goes in exactly the opposite direction than the official radiation risk estimates go," she said.

"Under these proposals, people would be forced to get the radiation equivalent of a chest X-ray 5 days a week, 50 weeks a year, for up to several years, with no medical benefit or informed consent, just from drinking water. This is immoral,"

she said the opposed changes “are a particularly egregious gift to the energy industry, which would essentially be given a free pass whenever nuclear or fracking waste enters our water supply.

To comment, the EPA says, people can submit remarks online at https://www.regulations.gov / document? D= EPA- HQOAR 2007-0268-0210. They should reference Docket No. EPA-HQ-OAR-2007-0268. They should note the Federal Register No. 2016-13786 and the date it was posted, June 10, 2016.

To comment via the U.S. Postal Service, write to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, EPA Docket Center, Docket No. EPA-HQ-OAR- 2007-0268, Mail Code 28221T, 1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20460

(Contact Talli Nauman at talli.nauman@gmail.com)