

Group claims proof of man-made uranium at IEL

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By KELLY HILL Repository staff writer

LAKE TWP. — A citizens' watchdog group claims that after nearly 20 years, it finally has proof that man-made uranium was buried at the Industrial Excess Landfill outside Uniontown.

A single groundwater sample collected by Concerned Citizens of Lake Township turned up an unusually high amount of a man-made uranium isotope, according to nuclear expert Mark Baskaran of Wayne State University.

The total amount of uranium is tiny, around 0.2 parts per million, Baskaran said.

But it's the type of uranium that's important: uranium 236, used in nuclear reactors. According to Baskaran, the ratio of the man-made isotope to natural isotopes was about 3,300 times higher than expected.

The U.S. and Ohio environmental protection agency representatives are wary of the result. Representatives from the agencies said they don't know when, where or how the samples were collected and are trying to get more information.

The fax put out by Concerned Citizens President Chris Borello contains no actual data from the test, just a summary of the results.

Tim Fischer, the EPA's coordinator for the Superfund site, said the lack of data leaves U.S. EPA flummoxed.

"We're not quite sure what to respond to," he said.

Still, he added, the agency will make some written reply to Baskaran.

Even if the results are confirmed, that is no guarantee anything will change at the landfill. The U.S. EPA recently approved a plan by the companies who dumped toxic waste in the old gravel pit to use plants, trees and natural breakdown processes to clean it up. Everyone connected with the cleanup plan denies nuclear waste is a problem at the site, even though a former owner of the dump claims that military trucks delivered three "eggs" of radioactive material that were buried there during the late '60s or early '70s.

The site remains blocked off to the public behind a wire fence and "no trespassing" signs. Many surrounding property owners converted from private wells to municipal water.

But some private wells near the landfill were left usable for washing cars or watering their gardens.

They also could be used to test groundwater.

In October, said Borello, citizens collected two water samples of five gallons each from private wells west of the landfill off Cleveland Avenue NW. They used Baskaran's advice on how to take the samples.

The samples were hand-delivered to Baskaran.

Since the test method of mass spectrometry is not Baskaran's speciality, he forwarded the samples to Northern Arizona University.

Mass spectrometry is widely used to differentiate among isotopes of any given element. It weighs the mass of an element to determine the number of neutrons.

Baskaran said the test results were confirmed twice: once in November 2002 and again in February.

"Basically, it tells clearly that non-natural radiation is present in the ground water in the area adjoining IEL," Baskaran said. He urged more testing to explore the situation.

Borello believes the first results justify her nearly 20-year battle over the landfill.

Her watchdog group has hovered around the landfill controversy, buzzed loudly in the ears of elected officials, state and federal environmental officials, and the township and its hand-picked Community Advisory Group. Every once in a while, the group draws blood.

Rumors of radiation at the Industrial Excess Landfill have persisted for years. Officials dismiss the claims, saying the amount of radioactive material at the landfill reflects natural, or “background,” levels of fallout from nuclear testing that is distributed relatively evenly over the planet.

Borello has clamored for scientific justification on just what “background” is.

Ironically, some officials have responded to the latest fax from Borello’s group with the same questions that Borello herself has asked for years.

“The U-236 concentration is ~3,300 times higher than the background level,” Baskaran’s summary states.

“Well, what’s the background level?” asked Larry Antonelli, site coordinator from the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency’s Division of Emergency and Remedial Reponse.

“It didn’t really tell me very much,” he said of the summary. “It was a page and a half that was obviously written by Dr. Baskaran to CCLT. There were only two bullet(point)s that pertained to data that he claimed they collected and analyzed. ... The rest of it was background information about expected distribution in nature.

“We would certainly like to see a lot more documentation than that.”

Antonelli said he is relying on nuclear physicists at the Ohio Department of Health to help understand the nuclear context.

Borello hopes that rather than focusing on the minutiae of her group’s test results, the agencies will try to dispel the questions by allowing more testing.

She said the situation would be easily solved if any interested party — such as CCLT, former landfill owner Charles Kittinger and plaintiffs in pending legal suits against the companies — had testing access. The agencies, she said, could take their own tests to verify results.

Fischer, the IEL overseer, said the companies paid for some mass spectrometry in recent years, but nothing turned up. He noted, however, that kinds of mass spectrometry vary.

The Community Advisory Group, which is backed by Lake Township officials, endorses the company cleanup plan and says the surrounding land could be developed for a park or other uses.

But other residents cling to memories of trucks with nuclear placards driving through Uniontown at night, headed for the IEL.

The U.S. EPA and the Department of Justice said it can find no evidence to support landfill owner Charle Kittinger’s claims that military vehicles delivered radioactive eggs to the dump and that he buried them.

Kittinger believed the containers held plutonium 238.

Borello wants to check further. Last year, her group got a \$50,000 grant for testing, and she has since waged a battle of faxes and phone calls to get permission to independently sample some of the 50-plus wells scattered across the 30-acre landfill and its 17-acre buffer zone.

She said an unresponsive U.S. EPA and “arbitrary strings” attached to access have stymied the effort.

U.S. and Ohio EPA officials say they're just asking Borello's group to abide by the same rules as the companies must, and Concerned Citizens has to take responsibility for locating specific wells, making sure they're on government property and documenting that the work will be done according to strict safety and test regulations.

Borello argues that the agencies and company contractors haven't always abided by those rules. And, she asks rhetorically, if the landfill is so safe that nature can clean it up, why should testing be limited to the government or contractors paid by the polluters?

So far, no one has granted the group permission; both Concerned Citizens and U.S. EPA say the other side hasn't been responsive to requests. Meanwhile, the companies responsible for the landfill clean-up — Bridgestone/Firestone, GenCorp, B.F. Goodrich and Goodyear — have continued with the quarterly testing they worked out with the Lake Township trustees.

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