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From Phoenixville News

Firm monitoring build-up of radioactive materials in Schuylkill

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ROYERSFORD - A facility that cleans the uniforms of nuclear industry employees, including those at the Limerick Generating Station, is monitoring the buildup of low-level radioactive material in the Schuylkill River.

UniTech Services Group Inc. has discharged treated wastewater into the Schuylkill River since 2004, in accordance with safety standards set by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

On Friday, DEP issued a news release updating the public on its "field investigation," which began last summer in an effort to learn more about the possible cumulative effects of such discharges on both the river and its ecosystem.

"At no time did UniTech exceed its permitted discharge limits for radionuclides," Regional Director Joseph Feola stated. ***"However, based on our analysis of sludge that settled out at the Royersford's wastewater treatment plant, we now know that low-level radioactive material in liquid effluents can become concentrated over time."***

In December, DEP extended the investigation to the nearest downstream water supplier in Phoenixville. No radionuclides have been detected above state and federal drinking water standards to date, the agency stated.

"Recreational contact" with the Schuylkill River, including the consumption of fish, poses no risk to human health, the agency stated. Still, DEP described these results as preliminary and said further study is needed.

Although the detected level of radiation is not considered a threat to human health, that does not mean the fish in the Schuylkill are safe to eat in large numbers, Spokeswoman Debra Frees Fries said.

The fish advisories in place for the river's fish are due to high levels of PCBs, not radiation.

Radioactive materials, specifically enriched uranium, are used in nuclear power plants as fuel. Other sources include medical x-rays, some consumer products, and natural radiation that forms in the human body, according to Exelon Nuclear.

Company spokesman Joseph Szafran said the Limerick station is one of many that use UniTech for laundry services.

David Allard, the director of DEP's Bureau of Radiation Protection, described the Royersford facility as "a nuclear laundry," whose customers - he assumed - include Limerick, Three Mile Island, Oyster Creek, Beaver Valley and other nuclear plants in the middle states.

The levels of radiation in the water discharge are required by permit to be at four millirems or less "at the discharge point. The normal limit was 50 millirems, but the NRC ratcheted it down in this case," he said.

Four millirems is the drinking water standard set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

His agency's announcement, Allard said, is not to cause alarm but to alert the public to the monitoring efforts going on here.

"We want this to be fully transparent," Allard said.

In 2004, low-level radioactive waste from a sewage plant in Royersford set off alarms at a Bucks County landfill. The Intelligencer newspaper reported last summer that the NRC and DEP signed off on plans to ship more waste to landfills at Falls and Tullytown.

Alarms were also set off at the Pottstown Wastewater Treatment Plant in 2004 after operators sent sludge there for "de-watering," Allard said.

UniTech, a subsidiary of UniFirst Corporation, released a two-page statement on this most recent announcement from the state's environmental enforcement agency:

"The report indicates absolutely no threat to the health and safety of human beings, animals and fish, and the environment."

Located at 401 N. Third Ave., UniTech's Royersford facility has been open since 1984. Michael Fuller, manager for health, physics and engineering, said customers include university research facilities, government agencies and uranium fabricators.

He showed Journal Register News Service reporters a map detailing the water sample collection points. Company spokesman Ken Kilpatrick said UniTech would continue additional sampling to ensure radioactivity levels remain low. A Web site - www.ConcerningOurRiver.org - was launched to inform the public, Kilpatrick said.

According to DEP, a sampling of river water, sediment and aquatic life in the area of UniTech's discharge point showed "varying low levels" of cobalt-60 and cesium-137.

Fries said tests also found levels as high as 113 pico-curies per gram in the aquatic vegetation near and downstream of the outfall and a level of 0.24 pico-curies per gram in the bass caught in the river near the outfall.

A "curie" is a unit of radioactivity.

Beginning in 1985, the company began to explore releasing treated "wash water" into the Schuylkill River. Prior to final permit approval in February 2004, UniTech released this wastewater into the treatment plant owned by Royersford borough. Today, the company's plant can treat up to 70,000 gallons per day, Fuller said.

"We have our own biological treatment plant in the facility," he stated.

A small amount of radioactive solids are removed from the wastewater during treatment, which are then shipped to a disposal site in Utah, according to Allard and Fuller.

Approximately 100 people work at this location, which variations depending on the season, Fuller said.

Last March, Pennsylvania became a NRC "agreement state" and DEP's Bureau of Radiation Protection assumed licensing and inspection responsibilities for facilities like UniTech.

<http://www.phoenixvillenews.com/articles/2009/02/25/news/srv0000004766350.txt>