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Report: Nemo water testing recommended in '95

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NEMO — A 1995 report to the United States Forest Service (USFS) prepared by the Federal Bureau for Reclamation, on the potential for toxic contamination at Nemo recommended testing of wells in the area which did not take place until last week.

Those tests showed the powerful carcinogen Ethylene Dibromide (EDB), banned in 1984 by the Federal Environmental Protection Agency, was present in wells around the USFS Nemo Work Center up to 100 times for than is acceptable for safe drinking water.

No residents were notified of the possible hazard to health from a dump of EDB used in treatment of the Rocky Mountain Pine Beetle in 1975 by the USFS at the Nemo site, according to USFS spokesperson Glen McNitt, due to the result of the report which was finalized in December of 1995.

This in spite of the fact that the USFS received its first information on the possible dumping of EDB in 1994 when an employee came forward and made a report to USFS officials.

Discussions with officials of the State Department of Environment and Natural Resources, who got the same report in early

1996 and McNitt, indicate a "chicken or the egg" logic in which a finding of no danger at the site meant no demand for the quick testing that was the only way to find out if there was any danger.

The Preliminary Assessment (PA) done by George Gliko of the Bureau of Reclamation is a standard first step outlined by the EPA for following up on reports of possible contamination from a toxic chemical.

Documentation from the EPA and state and federal officials shows the PA process is a "desk top" exercise where existing documentation on the site in question as well as phone interviews are used along with a rigidly specified scoring system for what is learned leads to a "score" through math formulas which is supposed to show whether there is danger or not.

Even with the PA including a site visit for a "visual inspection," according to Gliko, there is no requirement for any sampling of water unless the final score is high enough to indicate a danger.

In the case of EDB, it is odorless and colorless and the amounts necessary to be toxic, according to the EPA, is any amount in water over 50 parts per trillion, making the observation of the chemical very unlikely even at toxic levels.

The inspection report documents for the 1 include looking for such things as odors water or discoloration.

While the Nemo site received a score approximately one-half of that necessary indicate danger sufficient for further action by the USFS, Gliko points out he also included in his conclusions some important information.

He notes that no data is available to him water in the area and water is the most likely means of a problem from the buried EDB is, in fact, present.

Further he recommends a series of actions including sampling of water, drilling of wells to determine possible travel of chemical and the careful removal of any contamination if it is found.

Administrator for the DENR Ground Water Quality Program said his office was given PA by the USFS in early 1996 but saw need for concern due to the No Fur Remedial Action Planned recommendation that report.

The low score, he said, led to an assumption there was no danger or need to immediately sample wells or notify residents in the area.

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He said his office was in contact with the USFS, discussed their plans and "it looked fine to us."

"From what they told us they did not know there was a problem until they took a sample and found out," he said.

"Maybe there is an inherent flaw in the process but it has been going on for I don't know how many years," he added.

In a letter from State DENR Program Scientist Kim McIntosh to the USFS dated January, 4, 1996, she notes she wants to know of any further findings on the site of "... contamination, (if any exists), ..." but according to Markley his department is now involved in making sure the USFS properly takes care of citizens and cleans up the contamination although no pressure was exerted prior to last week to deal with the Nemo site or to see testing was performed.

Gliko said if there had been water sampling data available as was obtained from well testing last week by the USFS showing high levels of EDB, "... it would have jumped that (the number for indexing the danger level) considerably, it would have been a real

hot issue right off the bat."

McNitt said the Black Hills National Forest created an "Action Team" after receiving the report compiled by Gliko which included a "Action Plan" that "identified that we should test the well need to get funding and hire a contractor (to remove any contamination)."

"We did not follow through," said McNitt. "We were under the impression, based on the PA, there was a low probability of anything getting into the water system."

"This was based on the information we had that was a bad assumption and a bad decision on part," he said.

"We dropped the ball," said McNitt. "We have a false sense of security that this was not a critical nation."

"We are following through on the Action Plan just took us two years instead of one month," said McNitt.

Work on the site stopped yesterday, he said, when the contractor hired to remove the contaminant EnviroSearch, realized it did not have the necessary protective equipment required to allow employees work an entire day once any of the EDB is uncovered and exposed to air.

Work is expected to begin again today and a meeting is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. today with representatives of the USFS, an EPA toxicologist, and a representative of the DENR at the Nemo Firehall to discuss the situation with affected residents.

Glenn M.