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Agency downplays NFS risk of cancer - Sierra Club official assails report as 'garbage'



Linda Modica of the Sierra Club expresses incredulity at the size of the National Nuclear Security Administration's recent report compared to much bulkier Department of Energy reports. (Jim Wozniak / Johnson City Press)

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ERWIN – Addressing a controversy that has created confusion and heated debate for a month, the National Nuclear Security Administration reiterated Wednesday that the risk for cancer as a result of the downblending of highly-enriched uranium at Nuclear Fuel Services is low.

"This exposure ... is much, much less than a single chest X-ray," said Dean Tousley, director of the NNSA's program support division. "It's much less than a single, round-trip, cross country airplane flight.

The conclusion, which has led to disputes about the accuracy of figures, was the highlight in a recent supplement analysis conducted by that federal agency. The 27-page report looked at whether current and proposed disposition of highly enriched uranium throughout the country required an update of a previously conducted environmental impact statement. The NNSA report concluded that was not necessary.

The report's contents did not sit well with those attending a meeting Wednesday at Town Hall. Linda Modica, chairwoman of the Sierra Club's Radiation Committee, called the report inadequate. She pulled out two thick binders that detailed activity by the Department of Energy, of which the NNSA is a division, on a different matter and compared it to the size of the report issued in October.

"And this is what you do for Erwin?" she asked sarcastically. "Sirs, no, this is unjust. This type of review, I'm sorry, does not cut mustard. And I'll be perfectly frank. I think it's garbage. You could have done better. You could have done a lot better. And this really needs to be redone."

A footnote in one section of the report drew the attention of some regional residents. It said the off-site population risk "is equivalent to the following increased annual risk of a (latent cancer fatality) occurring in the total off-site population" and then provided a figure of 1 in 71 for NFS.

The number quickly became subject to differing interpretations. Modica issued a news release in late February that said one in 71 Erwin residents would die of a latent cancer from NFS' conversion of highly-enriched uranium to a low-enriched form.

NFS spokesman Tony Treadway said the company contacted the report's writer, Hitesh Nigam Sr., and was told the risk was actually one in 85 million that someone within 50 miles would contract a latent cancer.

On Wednesday, Tousley said the agency's "conservative" analysis examined the impact of downblending within 50 miles, which has a projected population of about 1.3 million. He made another attempt to explain the numbers.

"You could say it one of two ways," he said. "It would be one chance in 71 that one additional person could get a latent cancer fatality. Or if you took it over 70 years, you would say one person over 70 years could get a latent cancer fatality. That was the meaning of the report.

"My chance of getting cancer from this activity, according to this analysis, would be about one in 85 million. For this reason, we concluded that although there were some changes in the environmental impacts from 1996 to 2007 caused by a number of different things, the impacts were still very low and it was not necessary for us to do a supplemental (analysis) for this activity."