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Radiation fears linger in spite of assurances

By SOUMYA KARLAMANGLA
 DAILY CAL STAFF WRITER
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Berkeley resident Akane Nobusa has spent the past few weeks raising money for the those affected by the recent disasters in Japan, the country in which she was born and raised.

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Nobusa, who has lived in the city since 1992, runs a small nonprofit that has been collecting resources for victims of the multiple crises - the earthquake, tsunami and damaged nuclear reactors - that hit her country of origin. While she said she is primarily "very, very, very worried" about the dangers of radiation in Japan, she also said, after seeing news of low levels of radiation hitting the West Coast of the United States, that she is not confident there is no risk in the Bay Area.

Locally, such anxieties are common, even as national officials say that Americans face no risk from the radiation detected in air, water or milk. With few sources of raw data available, the numbers collected by UC Berkeley scientists are commonly used by people to either quell or confirm their fears, though campus scientists said some analyses of the numbers are misleading.

Many articles online cite the levels of radioactive iodine-131 detected in rain water by the monitor on the roof of Etcheverry Hall on March 23 as 181 times higher than the Environmental Protection Agency's limit for tap water. However, Kai Vetter, a campus associate professor-in-residence of nuclear engineering, said these conclusions are deceptive.

He said that radiation levels in tap water from March 23 - the highest detected so far - are actually nearly five times lower than the EPA standard. That standard, he added, is conservative and based on a yearlong period.

But some think that campus researchers and the EPA are trying to downplay the dangers of radiation.

"You have enough radiation that's above the federal drinking water standards - those are the standards, the bottom line," said Alexander Higgins, one of the first to reference the factor of 181 on his blog.

UC Santa Cruz lecturer on nuclear policy Daniel Hirsch said the lack of available data makes it difficult to discern whether there is a risk.

"It's a little bit shocking that you can have rain water higher than what you can drink," said Hirsch, who is also president of the Committee to Bridge the Gap, an anti-nuclear organization. "Rain water falls on grass and on plants ... the pathway of concern is the ingestion pathway of water and milk and other agricultural commodities."

While worries persist, campus professors like Vetter are trying to dispel them by supplying up-to-date information.

"(We want to) provide some kind of independent measurement," he said. "Yes, we see the increased levels of radiation, but it's really very small in context."

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