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U.S. water routinely tested for radioactivity

BY KENT JACKSON (STAFF WRITER)

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Releases from a troubled nuclear power station in Japan isn't the only way radioactivity enters water in Pennsylvania.

While the fallout from the damaged reactors at the Fukushima Dai-ichi plant in Japan was detected in Pennsylvania rainwater on March 25, American water companies have been checking for radioactivity for at least a generation.

Radiation can enter water naturally from surrounding rock that contains uranium or radium, from mining or from oil and gas drilling. Traces of radiation remain from Cold War tests of nuclear bombs.

People who drink water with radioactivity above regulatory limits for years can slightly increase their risk of cancer, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says.

Water companies in Pennsylvania and throughout the nation must test for radium, uranium, and alpha and beta particles.

The increase in natural gas drilling in Pennsylvania's Marcellus Shale formation raised questions about radioactivity. Water used in the fracking process can collect radioactivity as it returns to the surface through rock containing natural radioactivity.

On March 7, the state Department of Environmental Protection reported sampling results that showed rivers downstream from plants that treated fracking water contained no threatening levels of radioactivity.

Nor was the level of radioactive iodine-131 detected March 25 in rainwater considered a threat to public health. Gov. Tom Corbett pointed out that rainwater is seldom used for drinking, and he said drinking water supplies were safe.

Water also can collect radioactivity from coal or coal ash, which contains higher concentrations of radium and uranium. Coal, Dr. Bryce Payne, former visiting professor at Wilkes University, said.

Mark Carmon, a spokesman for the DEP in Wilkes-Barre, doesn't recall a public water source in the northeast region tests above standards for radiation.

The EPA has set regulations for radioactivity in drinking water since 1976, two years after the Clean Water Act passed.

Currently, the levels are 5 picocuries per liter for combined levels of radium-226 and 228 and 30 parts per billion for uranium. EPA set levels at 15 pCi/L for alpha particles and 4 millirems per year for beta particles.

Tests at local water systems showed results below the limits.

Radioactivity in the Hazleton City Authority's water sources have been so low that the authority has been at a "reduced monitoring level" for the past several years, according to Manager Randy Cahalan.

"We have done past tests that show almost no detection of radiation," Cahalan said. "If that's the case, they allow you to into reduced testing."

Testing is carried out at "source water" only, Cahalan said. The latest testing of authority water sources was conducted t to four years ago and complies with state and federal regulations, he said.

In 2003, water from the Kline Township Municipal Authority contained 0.811 piC/L of radium-228.

White Haven's water, according to its 2009 consumer report, contained 1.4 piC/L of combined radium-226 and 228, 1.5 piC/L of alpha particles and 0.8 ppb or uranium.

The combined radium in water at Eagle Rock in 2003 was 2 piC/L.

Aqua Pennsylvania, which operates the water systems in White Haven and Eagle Rock, believes the potential for harm f gas drilling is low because of state regulations.

"We can monitor going forward if there are any changes in the status of water quality," Aqua spokeswoman Donna Alst said.

Aqua takes a similar approach in Texas, where gas drilling flourished earlier, she said.

Another firm, Pennsylvania American Water, said on March 3 it was testing for radioactivity.

The tests taken at intakes along the Monongahela, Clarion and Allegheny rivers were conducted downriver from sites w water from gas drilling was treated.

Previously, the company took samples for radium in 2003, and the results fell below regulatory levels.

Through the Susquehanna River Basin Commission, technicians draw samples from selected monitoring points four tim year. Alpha and beta particles and strontium are among the substances checked for.

Nothing abnormal has been found so far, the commission's Spokeswoman Susan Obleski said in an e-mail, but the monitoring stations are upstream of water treatment plants.

Staff writer Sam Galski contributed to this report.

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