

DOE: Test Site areas radioactive, millions needed for cleanup

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By Mark McCormick/Gazette-Journal

Dozens of areas at the Nevada Test Site are radioactive and potentially dangerous, according to a federal study that proposes a five-year, \$228 million cleanup of the area.

A Department of Energy official downplayed the DOE report Friday, saying it isn't cause for alarm. But a representative of a state watchdog agency says the DOE may not be telling the whole truth.

The federal report focused on the environmental health of nuclear-weapons sites in the United States. The Nevada Test Site, 65 miles northwest of Las Vegas, was the scene of numerous above-ground tests in the 1950s.

The report says scientists don't know how they would clean up contaminated soil at the Test Site.

The report also says current operations at the Test Site are in violation of several state health laws and federal environmental laws. It would cost about \$7.2 million to comply with existing laws, the report said.

Potentially hazardous conditions include a substandard sewage plant, poor water systems and 26 faulty underground storage tanks.

However, DOE spokesman Darwin Morgan said the areas addressed in the report are only potentially dangerous and are slated for remedial measures.

"By no means is there a cause for

alarm," Morgan said. "There is no known immediate health risk to persons working within or outside the site. These areas are not violations; they are potentially dangerous and need some corrective action."

But the head of a Nevada watchdog group said that while the DOE should be applauded for releasing the information, there definitely is cause for concern.

"Any time a government agency makes that kind of information available, it's good. I'm sure they swallowed hard before they did it," said Bob Fulkerson, executive director of Citizen Alert.

"But it has to be taken with a grain of salt. These are only the 49 sites that DOE is telling us about. Who knows what the

hell is going on out there? I'd bet my bottom dollar that they're not telling the whole truth."

Morgan said all of the contaminated sites are in remote and isolated areas and that they need varying levels of attention.

"Some of the corrective action could be just as simple as posting signs saying that this is a sanitary dump area," he said. "Others could be as complex as a surface cleaning in an area where there was some above-ground testing. But there is no health threat to anyone."

Lew Dodgion, of the state Division of Environmental Protection, said he didn't

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think there was cause for alarm. Still, he said, he didn't know the extent of the contamination.

"They do have some areas where hazardous waste was improperly disposed of, but it looks as if they can be mitigated," he said.

Dodgion said the five-year cleanup plan is ambitious. "It seems like a short period of time for cleanup, but we're going to stay on top of it."

Environmental problems at the Test Site are detailed in a draft of the Energy Department's new five-year plan for cleanup and waste management programs at nuclear weapons facilities around the country. Few changes are expected when the final plan is made public Aug. 25.

The plan lays out a \$19.5 billion strategy for beginning a cleanup of weapons plants and the Test Site.

Fulkerson said there should be more research on nuclear tests' effects on areas downwind from the Test Site. He also would like to see a program allowing unannounced inspections at the site.

"Just bring in a SWAT team of chemists and scientists to collect soil and water samples," he said. "Our state needs to get it back together and get down there and check things out."