

Cold War radiation discovered on Amchitka Island

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Trace amounts of radioactive materials have been found on Amchitka Island in the Aleutians, according to a Greenpeace report issued Oct. 30.

The report was written by Greenpeace. Amchitka Island was the location of a series of nuclear explosions conducted by the Department of Defense during the Cold War.

"Even the trace amounts of radiation indicated by this Greenpeace report are unacceptable," Governor Tony Knowles said in a news release. "The serious concerns raised by this report must be addressed by the federal government, with the full involvement of the state and Aleutian residents. The nuclear testing that occurred on Amchitka Island is an unwelcome legacy of the cold war which cannot be ignored."

During the 1960s and 1970s, nuclear bombs were detonated a mile or more underground. The first bomb was detonated in 1965 and had a yield of 80 kilotons. The second blast in 1969 yielded one megaton. The last explosion was in 1971, yielding five megatons, which ranks as the largest nuclear test ever conducted.

One kiloton has the explosive power of 1,000 tons of TNT while one megaton has the exploding power of 1 million tons of TNT.

"It was the third and largest (explosion) in 1971 that became the seminal event in the founding of Greenpeace," said Bob King, press secretary for Knowles.

When the explosions went off, a large hole was formed underground. This caved in and a lake was formed, becoming the stressed area. It has been tested in the past by the Department of Energy, which found no contaminants.

The Department of Defense picked the Aleutian island for testing because it

was uninhabited and remote. For a short time during World War II it was used as a military base, which raises the question about the workers' health, according to King.

The state is concerned about Greenpeace's report, although it is too soon to give a conclusive evaluation of it. The Department of Environmental Conservation had already been planning to oversee the monitoring of the island by the federal government, according to DEC Commissioner Michele Brown.

"DEC is developing a program of independent monitoring and oversight of the U.S. Department of Energy's activities at Amchitka Island. This is being done through an Agreement in Principle that was signed between DOE and DEC in 1995. DOE is providing financial support for the state oversight," said Brown in a news release.

A community advisory board to provide meaningful involvement in the planning, studying and sampling of Amchitka Island is being established by DEC and

the Aleutian/Pribilof Islands Association, according to Brown.

"If there is a leak, then the federal government is responsible to clean it up and monitor it in the future since they did the testing," said King.

"Our (DEC) purpose is to see that DOE's Amchitka activities properly characterize the environmental conditions, incorporate Alaskans' concerns and that proper actions are taken if there are any indications of adverse impacts to public health or the environment," said Brown.