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History of AEC Atomic Testing

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Since the Atomic Energy Commission set up operations on Amchitka Island in January 1967, its activities there have been the center of a blast of controversy in Alaska over atomic testing on Amchitka, in Alaska, or anywhere at all.

In 1966, when the AEC (according to their reports, began searching for a new test site

(Continued on page 6)

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(Continued from page 1)

for future high-yield thermonuclear weapons testing, they reportedly considered several sites.

Their existing Nevada Test Site was limited because of "possible resultant effects on offsite buildings, particularly multi-story buildings in Las Vegas." An additional test site in Central Nevada faced the same problem.

"Rather than risk the accusation that a test had tilted Howard Hughes' roulette wheels out of true," as Anchorage Daily News writer Dennis Hughes put it in 1969, "the AEC shifted its explorations to the North Slope and Amchitka."

Cape Beaufort was the suggested location on the North Slope—an area accessable only by air, too close to caribou and soon rejected. Both the Arctic Slope and Amchitka, however, had histories of AEC and Department of Defense interest.

Northern readers may remember back to the late 1950s when the AEC's 'Atoms for Peace Program' coined the idea of creating an atom-dredged harbor in Arctic Alaska. The 1962 Project Chariot, as it was called, would use atomic blasts to dredge a harbor at Cape Thompson, 30 miles southeast of Point Hope.

Despite the problem that most harbors in this part of Alaska were only usable for three months of the year due to heavy pack ice, AEC thought it was a fine project.

The plans for Project Chariot (originally set for combined blasts totaling 2.4 megatons but later revised downward) included extensive environmental and biological investigations in the test area, funded by the AEC and partially administered by the University of Alaska.

Dr. William O. Pruitt, a University of Alaska biologist opposed the blasts when he found that fallout from atmospheric testing was being concentrated in the lichens on the Arctic Slope, Caribou, the main land animal in that area, eat lichens. Eskimos eat caribou.

Eskimos also have one of the highest body radiation counts of any people in the world-without a local atom project. After an internal muddle (people fired, arguments tossed about, some resignations), the late Senator Bob Bartlett raised the issue in Congress. Project Chariot foundered and died.

Amchitka, a barren, uninhabited island 1,340 miles WSW of Anchorage also had a nuclear history. Inhabited by sea lions, bald eagles, sea otters and more than 100 varieties of birds, it had been a fighter and bomber base during World War II.

In 1965, it was the site of Project Longshot, an 80 kiloton blast fired as part of the Department of Defense' program on nuclear test detection.

Amchitka was desolate, reachable via sea, far from high buildings and had the added benefit of plenty of World War II relic harbors, buildings, roads, airstrip, etc. suitable for use by AEC crews. So, President Johnson approved Amchitka as the site of two or more future multimegaton blasts.

When AEC crews began preparations for Project Milrow, a 1.3 megaton "calibration experiment" (Nobody in AEC parlance uses the term bomb) in 1967, Alaskans still had vivid memories of the disastrous 1964 Good Friday earthquake and tidal waves.

Opposition began with the blast's planning and built up towards the summer of 1969—with the early October Milrow blast date only a few short months away.

A citizen's committee called Save Our State mounted a furious summer's opposition, aided by hundreds of Alaskans who signed petitions and contributed money. The group funded scientists such as Dr. Michael Friedlander, physics professor at St. Louis' Washington University on speaking trips to urge the blast's postponement.

In a last ditch opposition effort, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, chaired by Arkansas Senator J.W. Fullbright held late September hearings to determine the effect of the blast on U.S. relations with Pacific rim nations. Senator Mike Gravel (D-Alaska) who asked for the hearings, had been in the forefront of opposition to the nuclear testing since long before 1969.

Highlight of the last ditch Fullbright hearings was testimony by Dr. Kenneth Pitzer, then President of Stanford University and before that head of research at the AEC.

The report, the results of a high level scientific panel, headed by Pitzer, which held hearings on the problems of underground tests, was not released till the eve of the blast. It was forwarded to President Johnson's science advisor and relayed to President Nixon's staff ten months before the hearings which made the report public.

According to Dr. Pitzer's testimony to the Senate group "The panel is seriously concerned with the problem of earthquakes from large yield-nuclear tests."

Amidst chrages of "supression" of the report, Senator Fullbright's committee asked President Nixon to halt the Milrow blast. A week later it exploded on schedule—October 2, 1969.

The effects, according to an AEC wrap-up report, were minimal on the islands wildlife and environment. No surface or ocean radiation leaks could be detected. No major earthquakes occurred. No tidal waves resulted.

With these results, the AEC continued plans for its higher megaton blast—Project Cannikin. Cannikin, scheduled for October of this year could be up to a 5 megaton blast and is, if possible, surrounded by even more controversy than its predecessor.

Of course, not all are opposed to the blasts. For one thing, the atomic testing program has pumped almost 100 million dollars of federal funds into Alaska. The Amchitka site provides jobs for upwards of 200 men and a large contract for Alaska's construction industry. Also, it has been called necessary for the national defense by a score of DOD experts and many Alaskans believe the small effects of Project Milrow do not justify opposition.

In the spring of 1971, Amchitka again hit the front pages when the AEC announced the Cannikin blast. Governor William Egan, in the midst of oil pipeline impact hearings, petitioned for hearings on the Cannikin blast.

In May of 1971, the AEC, not the Environmental Protection Agency as petitioned, held hearings in Juneau and Anchorage. While scores of AEC officials preached the safety of the blasts, scores of Alaskans registered their protests, along with Canadians from such colorfully named protest groups as 'Amchitka 2,' 'Action Against Amchitka,' and the 'Don't Make a Wave Committee.' One Canadian witness proclaimed the Canadians "unwilling guinea pigs' to the experiments and told the U.S. to hold its atomic tests at the geographic center of its country—not near Canada.

At the same time, in May 1971, speculation arose that President Nixon might cancel Cannikin due to the political risks involved. A blast-caused earthquake could prove disastrous in light of agreements to negotiate with the Soviet Union to limit defensive anti-ballistic missile systems.

The Cannikin explosion, expected to be part of an ABM system, might prove unnecessary if Strategic Arms Limitation Talks proved successful. An accident might sabotage these talks.

Thus, in Alaska this week as a Federal Court judge turned down a conservation group suit to stop the test, Alaskan Senator Mike Gravel speculated that the entire situation will be resolved within 60 to 90 days.

Of course, with the blast scheduled for early October, it will be resolved in approximately six weeks—one way or another.