

Amchitka Blast

A proposed 5 megaton Atomic Energy Commission blast on Amchitka Island has attracted wide questioning and criticism in the past week as Alaskans ask what damage such an atomic device can wreak on the Alaskan environment.

The blast, which was announced last week, is reportedly scheduled for October and will

explode with a force equal to magnitude 7.0 on the Richter scale. The AEC does not believe this is large enough to trigger a serious secondary earthquake.

The blast at Amchitka may be the largest underground test

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scheduled to date, certainly larger than the 1969 Milrow blast of 1.2 megatons.

A recent AEC environmental impact report on the Milrow blast reported no serious damage from that blast. This result probably prompted the decision to go ahead with larger tests on Amitchka.

On April 14, Gov. William A. Egan urged that public hearings be held in Alaska, under provisions of the 1970 National Environmental Policy Act, on the nuclear test.

The governor sent letters requesting such hearings to two Federal environmental protection officials - Russell Train, chairman of the Federal Council of Environmental Quality and William D. Ruckelshaus administrator of the Federal Environmental Protection Agency.

According to Governor Egan, the larger blast is code named Cannikan and its yield will be close to five times that of Milrow.

Cannikan will reportedly be a test of an enlarged warhead for the Spartan anti-ballistic missile. This is the long range version of the ABM designed to destroy incoming enemy missiles in the upper atmosphere. It's range is more than 400 miles.

Cannikan will reportedly be exploded at the bottom of a hole 6,000 feet deep and ten feet wide, the largest such hole ever dug for the underground explosion of a nuclear test.

The AEC began use of the Amitchka site on a deserted Island in the Aleutian Chain when larger yield underground nuclear tests became impossible at its Nevada testing site - within a few hundred miles of Las Vegas and Los Angeles skyscrapers.

Amitchka, they said in their

report on the Milrow blast, has the advantages of being distant from human habitation and accessible by year round sea transport.

The Milrow blast, according to AEC, was a "calibration experiment" designed to determine if larger underground nuclear tests can be carried out on the island safely.

Alaskans have been concerned that the frequent seismic activity in the Aleutian chain could be triggered by such a blast - causing earthquakes or tsunamis. This did not occur after Milrow, but the greatly increased power of the proposed blast has aroused new fears.

Other Alaskan political leaders have echoed Egan's concern and his call for environmental hearings. Among them is Sen. Mike Gravel (D-Alaska) who echoed Egan's call for environmental hearings.

Terry Miller, the Republican majority leader of the State Senate also supported the position.

"How can the federal government justify making private industry justify its possible ecological damage when the government doesn't conform to the act itself?" Miller asked. Other State legislators also back this position.

Alaskan newspapers have also echoed public concern. An editorial in yesterday's Anchorage Daily News quoted Majority leader Miller in his call for the same 1970 environmental guidelines to be applied to government projects and to private industry.

"In other words," the editor quoted Miller "if it's good for the trans-Alaska pipeline, it's certainly good for the federal government, considering the environmental risk being taken on Amitchka."