

Atomic arrogance:

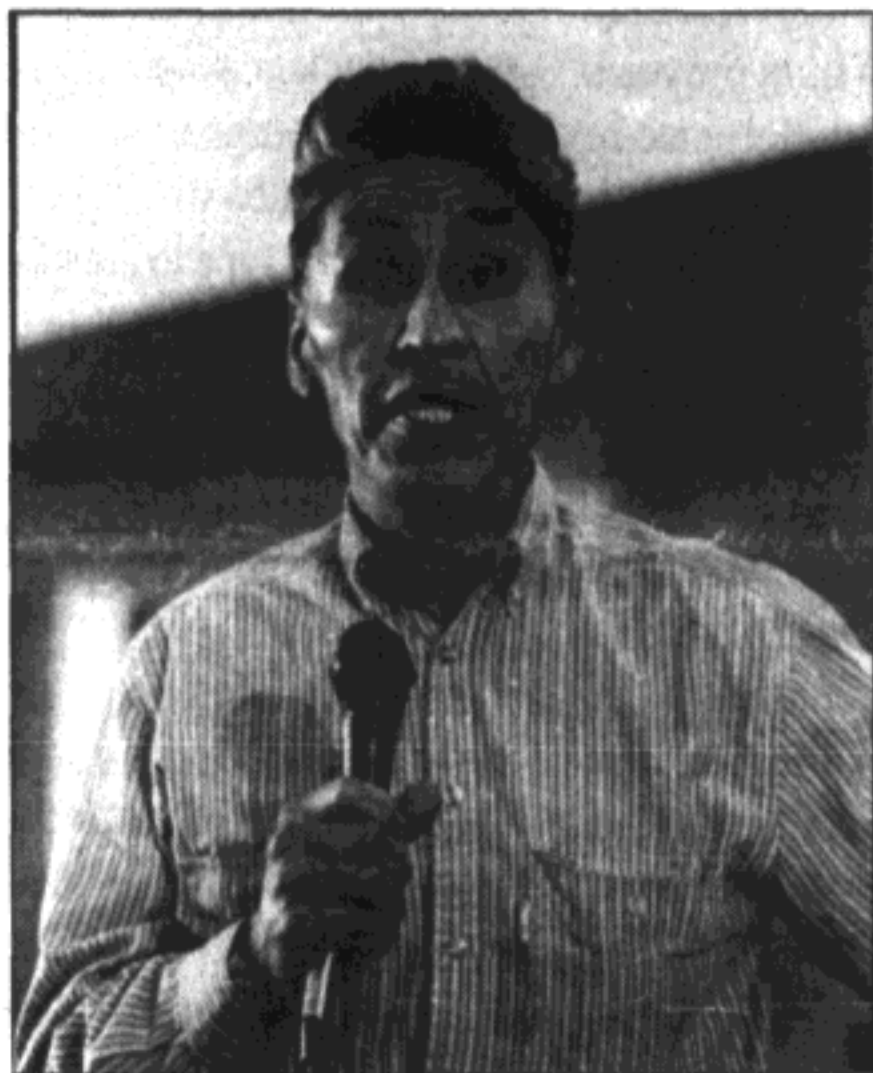
Fear, anger run deep in Point Hope

**By Karl Francis and
Jeffrey R. Richardson**

About 100 angry, fearful residents crammed into Pt. Hope city hall Oct. 9 demanding cleanup of a nearby nuclear waste site.

The federal official in charge of assessing

the danger of radiation from the abandoned site made a hasty visit to the village to hear local concerns and answer questions. Thomas Gerusky, a health physicist for the U.S. Dept. of Energy, led a team of federal and state officials who arrived in the northern town about noon for a 2 p.m. meeting. The party departed shortly after 3 p.m.



Wilfred Lane, Sr.(I of Kotzebue) addresses the meeting in Point Hope, Oct. 9, 1992. Lane owns a Cape Thompson allotment.



(Photos by Jim Magdanz)

Department of Energy health physicist Tom Gerusky listens to residents' concerns in Point Hope. His task is to come up with a cleanup plan.

The trip was to have included a visit to the Cape Thompson site about 26 miles south of Point Hope but bad weather forced cancellation of this plan, according to Chuck Kleeschulte, of Sen. Frank Murkowski's office.

Feelings are high and nerves remain taut following Gerusky's trip. Residents feel they were never told the truth about nuclear experiments conducted by the U.S. government in the area during the fifties and sixties.

One such effort, Project Chariot, involved a planned nuclear blast at Cape Thompson to assess the potential for non-military nuclear applications. Plans for the blast were later scrapped, but related experiments may have been moved forward.

Concerns that high local cancer rates are linked to radioactivity were heightened this year when nuclear contamination from testing, accidents and sloppy disposal of waste in the Arctic by the former Soviet Union became known.

The existence of Cape Thompson radioactive materials was confirmed following accidental discovery by University of Alaska/Fairbanks researchers. Gerusky's job is to determine what risks are posed by the site and submit a cleanup plan to his boss, Energy Secretary James Watkins.

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Gerusky was to take the pulse of Point Hope and answer questions. Many who were present seemed to feel he did both with a refreshing degree of seriousness and professionalism. A previous visit, led by U.S. Army Corps of Engineers representatives, has drawn much criticism from the communities for failing to dignify local concerns and provide information.

The short time allowed for the public meeting seems to have been the result of poor planning by trip coordinators. But when the questions started, Gerusky put his cards on the table. A woman, reflecting widespread sentiment, wanted to know how the government could bury radioactive materials in the tundra and leave it for decades without notifying local people or considering the risks to their health.

"I don't know," Gerusky said. "It was done 30 years ago. It was done in violation of their license. It shouldn't have been done. In those days, the Atomic Energy Commission did not tell many people very much and those they did tell were not always the ones who should have known."

In response to allegations that nuclear waste materials from the Sudan Project at the Nevada Test Site were brought to Cape Thompson,

Gerusky emphasized the need for thorough analysis of the Alaskan site, where contaminants are covered with four feet of dirt. This will help determine the origins of the material and point to preferred cleanup options.

Another woman asked why the federal government kept sending representatives who didn't have any concrete answers regarding responsibility for creating and covering up the site. Acknowledging that specific guilt had not been established, and may never be, Gerusky replied, "It was in violation of their license, but it was not far from standard practice at that time. You can blame the whole federal government. It should not have happened but it did."

Most of those at the meeting have lost relatives to cancer over the years. The U.S. Public Health Service has suggested high cancer mortality in Point Hope may result from lifestyle factors, such as diet and smoking. The villagers are not convinced, and personal loss compounded by the government's secrecy has created much bitterness.

"When you and I commit a crime, we have to go to jail for it. I hope that those that committed this crime

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will someday have to pay for it," John C. Oktalik, Sr. told Gerusky.

Wilfred Lane, Sr. of Kotzebue, who was a licensed chief radiologist thanks to a stint in the military, warned, "There's more to decontamination than simply removing the radioactive materials." He is demanding the opportunity to test materials from the site himself.

George Kinigik noted that if soldiers were used as research subjects to study radiation effects, which has long been known, it isn't so far-fetched to assume Arctic Eskimos were used in the same way.

"It was a holocaust," Kinigik said. "The Jews were treated better than we were. The Jews knew it was coming. But us ... it's horrible"

When pressed about the impacts of radioactive materials such as Cesium and Strontium 90 on humans, Gerusky said he and his team could provide solid health information. As he began to elaborate, he was notified his plane was ready to leave.

Following Gerusky's abrupt departure, the Project Chariot Committee, named for the aborted nuclear blast originally planned for Cape Thompson, convened a meeting. Pt. Hope, Kivalina, North Slope Borough and the Northwest Arctic Borough representatives comprise the committee.

The committee has taken on the task of monitoring government cleanup activities at Cape Thompson and pressing for full disclosure of the site's origins. An independent environmental cleanup firm from Colorado,

hired by the NSB, is providing technical support to the committee. The firm will thoroughly review all available data and federal plans and make recommendations for local response.

For Point Hope Mayor Ray Koonuk, Sr., the nuclear nightmare looks like other municipal crises: endless meetings, ringing phones and a parade of government personalities. But since the presence of buried radioactive materials near the village became common knowledge in early Sept. this municipal agenda has taken on a grim edge.

Neither the city nor the local village corporation, Tigara Corp. are experienced or technically equipped to respond to a situation of such far-reaching complexity, but their leaders are determined to

hold the government fully accountable for the Cape Thompson crisis. The two have joined forces, using their limited resources to maintain steady vigilance on federal cleanup activities. Efforts are being made to form an IRA council, which could tap additional federal dollars and technical assistance.

Koonuk says the credibility of the federal government has been destroyed by the Cape Thompson revelation.

"If they want to get our trust back they will have to cooperate in full," Koonuk told the *Tundra Times*. "I will do whatever I have to do."

The issue has created a substantial distraction from the company's business activities, but effectively ad-

ressing Cape Thompson is the highest priority," says Rex Allen Rock, Sr. of Tigara Corp.

"It has to do with my people, it's one and the same," Rock said.

Jack Schaefer, Tigara's land man, is convinced the Cape Thompson site is connected to experiments — which he feels may still be ongoing — to test the long-term impact of radiation on humans. He warned that the Project Chariot Committee would not allow the U.S. government to escape responsibility for its secrecy and deception by blaming Russian radiation sources.

"We want all records. If we don't have them, we have to suspect the effect is much larger (than we've been told)," Schaefer says.