

The threat of radiation: Where will the next shoe drop?

By Jeffrey R. Richardson
Throughout rural Alaska, people are now asking the same nuclear

questions people in Point Hope have been asking for years: What else aren't they telling us?

While a federal team headed to Cape Thompson to probe the cleanup prospects for an abandoned radioactive stash, the U.S. Air Force was flying representatives from the Alaska Federation of Natives and four Athabascan villages to inspect a military surveillance site powered by small nuclear generators. The generators were briefly threatened by a wildfire recently, raising concerns about radiation releases there. The USAF, insists the generators are safe, is to schedule public meetings in Fort Yukon, Arctic Village, Venetie and Birch Creek.

The revelations about Point Hope and Burnt

Mountain have made many Alaskans extremely skeptical about the intentions and integrity of government agencies with respect to radiation issues.

"This is chewing up so much of our time, it's unbelievable," says Carl Hild, executive director of the Alaska Health Project (AHP), a non-profit organization providing advocacy and and technical assistance on occupational

and environmental health issues. He's been getting calls from people worried about the presence and effects of radiation in their areas.

"We have received numerous calls. I would say we're receiving two phone calls a day for more than three weeks, says Hild.

Hild is familiar with the long-standing worries in Point Hope regarding impacts from nuclear experi-

See: Burnt mountain, page 15

Burnt mountain

(From page 1)

pacts from nuclear experiments, as he is a former health educator and deputy director for the North Slope Borough. He made numerous inquiries of government agencies, asking if there was any reason for concern about radioactive materials left behind by Project Chariot.

"I was repeatedly told no nuclear material was ever taken there," Hild says.

Since the revelations about the Cape Thompson site, he has confronted several of his old sources. They tell him they only just now found out, this information has just recently been declassified. Hild says this response is credible, to a point.

"I'm skeptical on how much information I'm receiving. If I don't ask the

right question, I'm afraid I'm not getting all the answers. My concern is that some other project other than Chariot was carried out and they're not getting full disclosure on that," Hild says.

"Everytime we look at a new document, we turn up new information that leads to further concerns," Hild adds.

The concern at Burnt Mountain is whether the canisters of Strontium 90 that fuel the generators of the seismic detection instruments have been or ever could be breached, says Cynthia Monroe, spokeswoman for the Gwitchin Steering Committee.

"There are all kinds of things that could conceivably happen that could re-

lease the Strontium 90," Monroe says. A number of fuels could replace the radioactive material including solar power, diesel or hydrogen fuel cells, she says.

The canisters are designed to withstand a drop of up to 30 feet. The helicopters that brought them in, and apparently take them out if an alternative fuel source is adopted, fly higher than 30 feet, Monroe says.

"It's definitely a concern and probably a well placed one," she adds.

The canisters wouldn't even have to be breached to be hazardous. According to Hild, if a local hunter were to seek shelter from a storm in the buildings housing the generators at the site, it would take only four hours to receive the amount of radiation exposure that most

people are supposed to receive over a year. Hild says spending the night could have serious implications, he feels.

Adding to worries in the Yukon River drainage are unanswered questions about another military facility south of Burnt Mountain.

Whether the public meetings scheduled by the USAF to discuss Burnt Mountain can really resolve the underlying doubts of nearby communities remains to be seen.

"I think they're being responsive to the concerns, whether it's a public relations game to allay fears, or whether they're open-minded is another question," Monroe says.

Another effort to address concerns like those now faced by people in Point

Hope, Fort Yukon and other villages is an analysis of all radiological concerns facing Alaskans requested by Gov. Walter Hickel. The report, due by the end of Dec., will be prepared by the State Emergency Response Commission, a multi-agency body which the AHP is a member.

"The report is to look at all the radiological issues in the state," says Hild. "There are literally hundreds of radiological sites in Alaska," from microwave ovens and dental offices, to nuclear-powered runway lights, not to mention the recent disclosures about Russian nuclear activities in the Arctic.

"We're trying to provide the best information we can and assist people to ask the right things."