

Bakersfield station monitors radiation

By Steven Mayer, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Friday, March 18, 2011

As many Americans brace for the first measurable radiation expected to arrive in U.S. air space from Japan on Friday, more than 120 radiation measurement stations across the United States will monitor the strength of the invisible invasion.

One of those stations is located on a rooftop right here in Bakersfield -- though the exact location cannot be disclosed in the interest of security. There are a total of 11 stations in California, including in places such as Fresno and Anaheim.

The local monitoring station, which has been here for a number of years, is part of RadNet, a federal effort to monitor radioactivity in the United States resulting from nuclear emergencies -- and to provide baseline data during routine conditions.

"We look primarily at alpha and beta radiation," said Phil Powers, an air pollution specialist with the California Air Resources Board. "The monitor runs automatically 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

Government and private-sector scientists have said the radiation from damaged Japanese nuclear power plants is not expected to arrive at levels that are hazardous to human health. Nevertheless, fears of airborne radiation spurred a run on pharmacies and other stores across the country that carry potassium iodide, a compound that blocks the absorption of radioactive iodine by the thyroid gland.

"Given the fact that Japan is thousands of miles from the United States, it is highly unlikely that Americans would be exposed to radioactive iodine from direct inhalation of a plume from the Fukushima nuclear complex," the Union of Concerned Scientists said in a release Thursday. The widespread purchase of the pills by Americans has prompted fears, the group said, that there will not be adequate supplies in Japan in the event of a larger radiological release.

The local rooftop monitor includes an encased computer, a circular filter, a radiation detector and a transmitter that uplinks to a satellite, Powers said. Every 15 minutes, the monitoring station automatically sends the latest data via satellite to the National Air and Radiation Environmental Laboratory in Montgomery, Ala.

The system is designed to provide real-time information for short-term situations such as fallout, a nuclear accident, or environmental releases from other nuclear events. In the event of a major nuclear incident, data from RadNet can be used to determine the immediate and long-term environmental and public health impacts.

"As part of the federal government's continuing effort to make our activities and science transparent and available to the public, the Environmental Protection Agency will continue to keep all RadNet data available in the current online database," the EPA said this week in a release.

But for Powers, the data he's seeing at the local measurement station is hardly alarming.

"We're not seeing anything out of the routine here," he said.

To access RadNet monitoring data, go to <http://www.epa.gov/cdx>.

Kettleman City landfill ruling to be appealed

By Lewis Griswold, staff writer
The Fresno Bee, Friday, March 18, 2011

Environmental activists fighting a hazardous waste dump near Kettleman City -- which has been hit by a rash of birth defects -- announced Thursday they will appeal an adverse ruling in a lawsuit over Kings County's approval of the landfill's expansion.

Kings County officials would have no comment on the appeal until attorneys see the legal documents, said Deb West, assistant county administrative officer.

In January, Kings County Superior Court Judge Stephen Barnes ruled that the county followed state environmental laws when it approved an application for Waste Management Inc. to expand its Kettleman Hills hazardous waste landfill -- the largest such landfill in the West.

El Pueblo Para El Aire y Agua Limpio/People for Clean Air and Water, based in Kettleman City, and Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice, based in San Francisco, sued the county over the county's approval of the expansion. The groups are being represented in the appeal by California Rural Legal Assistance and the Committee on Race, Poverty and the Environment, which has offices in San Francisco and Delano.

The landfill has long been the focus of criticism by environmentalists and some residents who believe it might have caused 11 unexplained birth defects from 2007 to March 2010.

"This small town is bearing the brunt of environmental problems with little benefit," said lawyer Ingrid Brostrom from the Committee on Race, Poverty and the Environment. The small town in western Kings County is low-income and largely Hispanic.

Brostrom said the groups filed a notice of appeal Wednesday to take the case to the Fifth District Court of Appeal in Fresno.

The appeal comes as no surprise, Waste Management spokeswoman Jennifer Andrews said.

But company officials are confident the lower court's ruling will be upheld, Andrews said.

Meanwhile, Waste Management will continue to seek permits from regional and state air, water and toxic substances regulators for the expansion, she said.

The company has long said there's no link between the landfill and the birth defects.

It scored a victory in January when a study designed and reviewed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency found no link between birth defects and polychlorinated biphenyls -- a now-banned substance that can cause cancer, may cause reproductive harm and that is accepted at the landfill.

Waste Management paid for the study. The company also is paying Kings County's legal bills in the environmentalists' suit, Andrews said.

