

Is tritium linked to Cancer? Group to launch probe.

It seems to be a real concerned group rather than a bunch of paid activists operating in la-la- land.

Herald
May 3, 2006

Local resident Irene Clark said Exelon cannot be faulted for incidents of cancer in the Wilmington, Godley, Essex, Custer Park, Braidwood, and Braceville areas.

“You can’t blame it on Exelon — you can’t blame it on them,” Clark said Monday evening, during the **Concerned Citizens Awareness Group** (CCAG) informational meeting at the Custer Township Hall.

“But, you can’t help but wonder,” she added.

The CCAG organized the meeting in the wake of recent attention to tritium-laced water leaks at nearby Braidwood Generating Station at Braceville, starting in 1996, but not made public until December of 2005.

Tritium is a naturally occurring isotope of hydrogen that emits a very low level of radiation, and is found in more-concentrated levels in water used in nuclear generating stations.

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has gone on record stating public health and safety has not been jeopardized by the at least nine releases of tritiated water from the plant.

Monday’s meeting was the second for the group, which now plans to join with the grassroots citizens group in Godley on forming a committee to research incidence of cancer in the area.

The CCAG consensus is the tritium leaks of the past several years may be a factor in the cancer incidents, which the group believes are worth investigating.

Will County Executive Larry Walsh spoke Monday evening of the grassroots’ group meeting with U.S. Senator Dick Durbin, D-Illinois, two weeks ago in the Godley Town Hall, and noted the tritium issue “really hit home with him.”

“It’s hard to dispute these kinds of numbers,” he said the cancer-related deaths. “It would be interesting to see what we find out from doing a consensus of the area.”

Walsh said residents and authorities need to know if tritium-laced water from Braidwood Station has either caused or supported the cancer incidents.

“Will County government is behind your quest here. We’ll bring in the county health department,” he said.

“No matter how important our energy, jobs, and assessed valuation is to us, nothing — NOTHING — is more important than the quality of life of our citizens. We will do what we can to try and find an answer to this set of circumstances found here.”

He called the issue devastating.

“You can’t sit back and say, ‘What a coincidence,’” Walsh said. “I can’t speak for Senator Durbin, U.S. Senator Barack Obama, or Congressman Jerry Weller, but I think they have as much concern as we’re speaking of here tonight. We’ll do what we can do to try and come up with answers.”

CCAG co-leader Shirley Cavanaugh noted the death certificates of those who died from cancer lists other causes than cancer. Because of this, the deaths are not listed as having been caused by cancer, she said.

Co-leader Kim Morey noted the group does not have statistics to back up its observations.

Joliet attorney Kenneth Gray, whose law firm has filed a class-action suit related to the tritium spills, with Exelon as the defendant, spoke of the need for anecdotal evidence — gathering of data to analyze for any possible connection with radiation-related cancer in the area.

“If the court orders medical monitoring, hopefully it will be at Exelon expense,” Gray said.

An unidentified woman suggested incidents of animal cancers in the area be included in the data-gathering process.

“We don’t want to cause fear — that’s why we want to do the study,” said Gray. “The cause and effect of various diseases are very hard to prove. That’s why we’re trying to gather data and come to some logical conclusion.”

Cindy Sauer, wife of former area physician Dr. Joseph Sauer and mother to a 12-year-old with a brain tumor, spoke of the family’s leaving Grundy County two years ago, five years after their daughter was diagnosed with the malignancy.

She suggested the study be limited to a population area not more than 18 miles from the Braidwood Station site to not dilute the statistics. She also said information on the Public Health Web site “suggests something wrong in this area,” and noted the great need for an epidemiological study to look at the situation fairly and objectively.”

“When my daughter was diagnosed with the brain tumor, they said it was most likely environmentally induced,” she said. “I won’t point a finger at Exelon. Information from that industry is very visible.”

Sauer said she was concerned the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and others say the tritium levels in the Braidwood Station are safe. Even low levels of tritium do pose a risk, however, she added.

“Would your doctor orders an x-ray of your body every day? No,” Sauer said. “I think you are taking the first step tonight. Radiation is no different than second-hand smoke. We don’t need any more spin on the situation — we need information and facts.”

Walsh suggested concerned citizens contact their state and federal elected officials to urge the NRC to monitor human health in the areas of generating station.

He also suggested citizens circulate a petition or write short letters to their elected officials, asking the acceptable level of tritium in water be lowered from the current 20,000 picocuries per liter.

"We shouldn't be changing the environment," said Dr. Bruce Hogan of Will County.

He suggested the CCAG put together a committee to talk to the Will County Health Department and report back its findings, and be a repository for information.

A woman said her husband worked 17 years at Braidwood Station before he died of leukemia. She noted a number of employees at the station died of cancer.

"I think we ought to get the government involved in this," said a man who did not identify himself.

"The government is involved now," said Walsh. "Things have moved forward since this issue has come to light. When you are brought into a problem 10 years after it happens, we can't get answers in three to four months."

Walsh said results of 57 water well tests indicate none have surpassed the tritium level set by the government. He also said he understood no water samples from the Kankakee River test higher for tritium than the government level.

"I think the trigger has been tripped, and everyone shy of President Bush on down is watching Exelon," said Walsh, noting the utility acknowledges it has a credibility problem.