

Greenpeace warns of nuclear threat to Champagne

You have to admire the innovative Greenpeace lies aiming at the drink you love!

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The Champagne vineyards of France could face a nuclear disaster, according to Greenpeace which on Tuesday said radioactive underground water had been found just 10 kms from the country's most prestigious wine producing region.

Attempting to draw attention to its campaign against fuel reprocessing as the French Senate prepares to vote a new law on nuclear waste management, the environmental group said it had written to champagne producers to warn them of the dangers from a local nuclear waste storage site at Soulaire, eastern France.

The warning comes as Greenpeace published the results of a study conducted last week on France's first waste storage site in Normandy, which dealt with low and medium level waste before being closed in 1994 after 30 years' operation.

The report, by Acro, a private laboratory specialising in radioactivity analysis, said significant levels of tritium, radioactive hydrogen, had leaked into the environment. Samples of underground water taken near the Normandy site at La Hague last week showed levels some 90 times higher than European safety limits.

"We are sounding the alarm for future dangers," said Frédéric Marillier of Greenpeace on Tuesday, while admitting no proof had yet been found that the vineyards were contaminated. The storage site, opened in the 1990s and destined to be one of the world's largest with capacity for 1m cubic meters of waste, "poses a real threat to this region", he said.

Andra, the government body responsible for operating the site in Champagne was not available for comment on Tuesday. However people in the industry suggested that the tritium levels were not significant. "It is an element almost impossible to confine and the levels are very low," said one person who preferred to remain anonymous. "It is a well-known issue."

France has Europe's largest nuclear power programme, and is estimated to generate some 1,200 tonnes of spent fuel every year from its 58 reactors. Over the last year a public debate has been under way to help determine a national policy on waste management. The law to be voted on in the Senate on Wednesday recommends long-term deep underground storage as the "reference solution" for its considerable waste problem.