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Neptunium levels in 1961 believed not worrisome

The Paducah plant's former radiation protection head disagrees, in a deposition, with some recent reports on exposure.

From AP and staff reports

The man formerly in charge of protecting Paducah uranium plant workers from excessive exposure says he had proof from tests in 1961 that some workers had measurable radiation in their bodies from neptunium exposure.

But Richard C. Baker, who headed radiation protection at the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant for most of 35 years, said during a deposition for a \$10 billion lawsuit that the tests shouldn't worry anyone. Baker, who retired in late 1986, has lived in Paducah since joining the plant during its construction in 1951.

He said he believed the test results on 21 men reflected recent exposure to permissible levels of neptunium dust at the plant, which processed uranium for nuclear weapons. However, he said he wasn't required by law to calculate how much radiation workers were receiving.

Baker's statements came in about seven hours of videotaped deposition Sept. 12-13 and Sept. 13 in Paducah. It was transcribed into a 250-page document, a copy of which the Sun obtained Monday. The suit was filed last year in U.S. District Court here against the plant's uranium suppliers and its former operators.

The urine tests revealed neptunium stored in the men's bodies from long-term exposure to dust at levels an attorney called "off the scale."

If the tests had been done properly, "they would have had to recognize that they were nuking people in there, but they turned their heads in an unscientific way," said William McMurry, a Louisville attorney representing current and former plant workers and their families in the case. McMurry was quoted Monday by The Courier-Journal of Louisville.

He filed the lawsuit last year against Union Carbide, which ran the plant until 1984; Lockheed Martin, whose predecessor Martin Marietta Corp. took over from Union Carbide; and uranium suppliers General Electric Co., E.I. du Pont de Nemours & Co., NLO Industries Inc. and NLO Inc. Trial is scheduled in July 2003.

The suit alleges workers were unknowingly exposed to dangerous levels of radiation and

were “assaulted” by radioactive material brought to the plant from other facilities.

In September 1999, then-Energy Secretary Bill Richardson came to Paducah to apologize to workers who may have been exposed to dangerous radiation. During deposition, McMurry asked Baker if Richardson’s apology and the conclusions of government investigators about radiation exposure at Paducah were a fair criticism of him, as the person responsible for radiation protection.

Baker said no, adding that the conclusions generally "were not based on fact." He said he didn't believe investigators made up the facts, but "were greatly influenced in the way that they presented their case by the directions they had received from their management."

Robert Tait, a Columbus, Ohio, attorney representing some of the companies being sued, defended Baker, calling him “a hero of the Cold War.” In a Courier-Journal interview, Tait said the plant under Baker’s supervision complied with the law and applicable regulations “from the outset of operations through the present day.”

Baker’s deposition also disputed a February 2000 federal report that found widespread deficiencies in efforts to protect employees from harmful radiation levels.

In the report, the Energy Department found that during checks made in 1962, some measurements of airborne contamination from neptunium were as much as 100 times what the plant considered permissible. In 1980, airborne radiation from uranium in one Paducah plant shop was 1,680 times the plant limits; from neptunium 2,121 times; and from plutonium 2,483 times.

Baker said he didn’t remember such readings. “And if they existed like this, they were probably very, very infrequent or of very short duration.”

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