State Environmental Health Officials Monitor Low Levels of Radiation; No Threat Seen to Public Health

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RALEIGH No public health threat has been identified as state environmental health officials monitor low levels of radiation found in North Carolina, believed to be linked to the March 11 Japanese nuclear incident.

The Radiation Protection Section in the N.C. Division of Environmental Health has been notified of increased, albeit low, levels of the radioisotopes by both Duke Energy and Progress Energy. Department of Environment and Natural Resources Secretary Dee Freeman emphasized that there is no danger to public health or safety.

"We are aware of this tiny change because the state and the utility companies carefully and constantly monitor radiation levels," Freeman said.

"The slightest uptick will register. There is no reason for any members of the public to be alarmed or take any action."

Iodine 131 was reported by all three Duke Energy nuclear stations, including the McGuire nuclear plant located near Charlotte. Progress Energy reported similar findings at nuclear stations in South Carolina and Florida. These companies regularly monitor for radiological contamination according to standards established by the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

Identification of radioiodine in air monitoring is indicative of fallout from fuel degradation at the Fukushima Daiichi plant in Japan.

"It is not unexpected that North Carolina would see very low levels of radiation following the nuclear incident in Japan," said Lee Cox, chief of the Radiation Protection Section. "Similar levels of radioisotopes were found in North Carolina following the 1986 incident at the Chernobyl plant in Russia."

The discoveries in North Carolina follow a trend seen in other states.

Officials in Florida, South Carolina and Pennsylvania have also seen low levels of radioisotopes in their states.

The state routinely monitors the air around all North Carolina fixed nuclear facilities 24-hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year, while analyzing samples weekly. Water, milk, fish, shellfish and vegetation are also routinely monitored around the state.

As a result of these recent reports, the state has transitioned to daily environmental sampling. Samples will be analyzed and compared to baseline data, which allows the staff to detect increases in radioisotopes in the environment.

Public health officials are working closely with state and national environmental experts to monitor radiation levels to ensure that food and water supplies are safe for the public.

"The public's health is always our top priority," State Health Director Dr. Jeff Engel said. "At this time, the radiation levels detected in North Carolina represent no risk to human health. On any given day, we are exposed to much higher levels of radiation than these from natural sources like the sun."

For more information, please contact Lee Cox, chief of the Radiation Protection Section, at (919) 571-4141 or Lee.Cox@ncdenr.gov.