Is Leaked, Radioactive Tritium in Mississippi River Drinking Water?

By John LaForge

Xcel Energy's Monticello nuclear reactor on the Mississippi River has leaked some 829,000 gallons of wastewater contaminated with radioactive tritium into the groundwater on site, more than double the 400,000 gallons Xcel first estimated. The company has since replaced two leaking pipes, built an underground retaining wall, and is cleaning up after a second spill and its temporary reactor shutdown. Yet according to WCCO TV, for July 20, 2023, Xcel said a “small amount of leaked water may have reached the Mississippi River.”

On March 18, 2023, the Associated Press (AP) reported that a representative of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) told them that the tritium-contaminated wastewater from the reactor couldn’t contaminate the water people drink. The AP reporters quoted NRC spokesperson Victoria Mitlyng, writing: “Mitlyng said there is no pathway for the tritium to get into drinking water.”

In fact, there are two pathways for the tritium to leak into drinking water. First, the tritium in the 829,000-gallon leak is now in a groundwater plume that can move beyond Xcel’s Monticello site and reach private or public drinking water wells.

Second, the groundwater plume, which moves toward the Mississippi, will contaminate the river which supplies drinking water to one million-plus people in the Twin Cities and their suburbs and 38 million people downstream.

Perhaps Mitlyng was misquoted, since the NRC and the AP have both reported that the plume of tritium-contaminated groundwater can move outside Xcel’s boundary. In fact, both agencies have reported that Xcel’s stated purpose in hastily building an underground steel wall between the reactor and the Mississippi is to prevent the radioactive groundwater from entering the river.

The AP reported March 24, 2023 that Chris Clark, the president of Xcel Energy, said a “small amount of leaked water may have reached the Mississippi River.”

By Hinamoeura Morgant-Cross

Hinamoeura Morgant-Cross is a young French Polynesian whose realization that her own leukemia was a legacy of the French atomic tests in the South Pacific led her into activism. She works to ensure that the stories and experiences of the victims and their families will not be forgotten and to pressure the French government to both acknowledge responsibility and provide medical and financial support.

She was elected to the Polynesian Assembly of Representatives in May 2023 and shepherded an unanimous Assembly vote supporting the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. Morgant-Cross received the Nuclear-Free Futures Award in 2023 during the 2nd Meeting of the States Parties to the TPNW in New York. Nukewatch will feature the second part of her story in the summer 2024 Quarterly.

Nuclear Justice in Maohi Nui

Hinamoeura Morgant-Cross

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