Y-12 Respirator Contamination Goes Back to 2009

the Associated Press

OAK RIDGE, Tenn. (AP) — An investigation at the Y-12 nuclear weapons plant in Oak Ridge has found that workers may have been using contaminated respirators since at least February 2009 and possibly earlier.

Bill Reis, vice president for environment, safety and health at B&W Y-12, the government's managing contractor, told the Knoxville News Sentinel (http://bit.ly/xhT2eY [1]) that radiation technicians have surveyed thousands of pieces of respirator equipment that had been shipped off-site for cleaning. About 10 percent of the equipment exceeded required radioactivity limits. That included 503 respirator masks and 101 breathing tubes.

There's no way to know how many contaminated respirators may have been used by workers over the past few years.

Officials said they do not believe workers are in danger.

They said that if employees had ingested or inhaled significant amounts of uranium particles, the problem would have surfaced during regular screening tests.

"The reason we're not here freaking out is we have this other data," Reis said.

Global Solutions has held the contract for cleaning the respirators since 2010, in partnership with UniTech, a company that provides services throughout the nuclear industry. Before that, UniTech held the contract.

Buddy Garland, the head of Global Solutions, did not return a phone call to the newspaper seeking comment. Mike Fuller, the health physics and engineering manager for UniTech, declined to comment.

Authorities confirmed in February that some respirators at the plant were found to be contaminated, but at that time they did not know the extent of the problem.

Reis said investigators still are trying to figure out how equipment that exceeded the radioactivity standard was certified as clean at UniTech's plant in Barnwell, S.C.

He said UniTech has insisted that the equipment was being surveyed after cleaning to make sure it met the specifications.

A moratorium using UniTech is in effect while the investigation continues, although it has not been decided whether Y-12 will cancel the contract with Global Solutions/UniTech,

The investigation also has uncovered another problem. One of the sealed packages

contained respiratory equipment that was contaminated with radioactive cobalt-60, a material that is not used at Y-12. Reis said that finding raised the possibility that Y-12 equipment at the UniTech facility was contaminated by equipment form other nuclear sites.

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Information from: The Knoxville News Sentinel, http://www.knoxnews.com *[2].*

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