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From Mark Graffis <ab758@virgin.vip.vi>
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Message-ID <7j4tbe\$9u\$1@news.missouri.edu>

Environment [19]ENS -- Environment News Service

CLINTON INTRODUCES WATER QUALITY PROTECTION

In his weekly radio address Saturday, President Bill Clinton announced three new actions to improve water quality: expanded public health protections for thousands of miles of federal beaches; measures to prevent sewage spills that force beach closures; and a comprehensive strategy to better protect rivers and other water bodies on federal lands. Clinton directed the National Park Service and other agencies to expand water quality monitoring along thousands of miles of federal beaches - including the Cape Cod, Cape Hatteras, and Pt. Reyes National Seashores - to identify pollution sources. He directed the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to work with states to strengthen public health protections at other beaches, with a goal of stricter state water quality standards no later than 2003. The EPA was also directed to propose within one year a new national rule to prevent overflows from sewage systems - the major cause of beach closures. The President directed federal agencies to adopt a comprehensive strategy to better safeguard rivers, lakes, and other bodies of water on federal lands, after consultation with states, tribes and other stakeholders.

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BRACK WINS INDY 500 WITH NUCLEAR POWER FUNDING

team At the 83rd Indianapolis 500 Race on Sunday, Kenny Brack, driver of the #14 Power Team car owned by A.J. Foyt, won the race, taking the lead on the last lap. Sunday was a successful day for Power Team at the Indy as two Power Team cars finished in the top six. In addition to winning the most watched sporting event in the world, A.J. Foyt's teams also finished 3rd with driver Billy Boat, and 6th with driver Robbie Buhl. All three teams benefited from the PECO Power Team sponsorship. Power Team is the marketing arm of PECO Energy, Inc., which owns and operates several U.S. nuclear power plants including Peach Bottom Units 2 and 3 situated along the Susquehanna River in York County, Pennsylvania. PECO aims to win at the nuclear power game too by operating safely and expanding its reactor holdings. A May 10 performance assessment by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) recognized Peach Bottom's engineering group for safty and improved methods of investigation used during the troubleshooting of problems. The overall performance at Peach Bottom remained "acceptable." PECO has formed a joint venture with British Energy, named Amergen, which is in the process of purchasing Three Mile Island Unit 1. The purchase has been approved by the NRC. PECO has also reached agreement to purchase Clinton nuclear generating station in Illinois. PECO's Power Team is online at: [20 <http://www.pwrteam.com/>]

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YUCCA MOUNTAIN HIGH & DRY, USGS SCIENTISTS SAY

One of the great worries about using Yucca Mountain, Nevada as a permanent high-level nuclear waste repository is that even in the desert water will invade the storage chambers and dampen the containment vessels, releasing radioactive material into the environment. But now a new study by three U.S. Geological Survey scientists has found the site to have been dry for millions of years. The slow growth rates of calcite and opal minerals that coat fractures and cavities in Yucca Mountain attest to the mountain's hydrological stability say the researchers, who presented the results today at the spring meeting of American Geophysical Union in Boston. "There is no evidence at Yucca Mountain, based on the distribution of calcite and opal, that water has ever flooded the potential repository area," said James Paces, a USGS scientist from Denver, Colorado. Paces described cavities in the volcanic mountain's interior as being relatively free of deposits of calcite and opal. Where they are found these deposits are restricted mostly to the lower surfaces. "If water had filled the cavities, minerals would have been deposited on the walls and ceilings as well," Paces said. "Instead, our data indicate that the minerals formed from thin films of water flowing downward into open spaces." The long term hydrologic stability of Yucca Mountain, 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas, is an important factor in evaluating it as a potential site for storing nuclear waste. It is the only site being evaluated. The mountain is a thick accumulation of 11-to 13-million-year-old volcanic rocks, 1,600 to 2,00 feet of which are above the present water table. Because the USGS team knows how much water forms calcite and opal deposits over a given period of time, they were able to determine how much or how little water had seeped through the mountain.

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FIREFIGHTERS HAVE THEIR HANDS FULL IN FLORIDA, NEVADA, ARIZONA

The National Interagency Fire Coordination Center (NIFC) reports wildfires have scorched thousands of acres and continue to burn in Florida, Nevada and Arizona. More than 400 fire fighters from up to 30 states are battling the largest of the fires, the Friendly fire in the Osceola National Forest, Florida, which has crossed over into southern Georgia. The fire, located about eight miles from the communities of Benton, Florida, and Council, Georgia, has burned more than 53,000 acres. Firefighters report it is about 20 percent contained with an estimated date of full containment of June 20. There have been no reports of damage or injuries, but sections of Florida Highways 2 and 94 are closed due to heavy smoke. Fires are also burning in Arizona and Nevada, but crews have made good containment progress on the fires in each state. The Blue Garden fire, located 35 miles south of Caliente, Nevada, has burned about 10,000 acres. The fire is 20 percent contained with full control projected for June 3. Another Nevada fire, the 1,900-acre Rainbow Ranch fire, is about 70 percent contained and should be fully contained today. There were no injuries or damage to structures reported associated with either of the Nevada fires. In Arizona, the Jump Complex fire, 30 miles south-southwest of St. George, Utah, is 80 percent contained. Firefighters report they are planning for full containment by Wednesday.

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FUTURE ALFALFA SPROUTS MAY BE GROWN FROM IRRADIATED SEEDS

Treating alfalfa seeds and sprouts with a combination of irradiation

and chlorine effectively safeguards them against contamination by E. coli O157:H7 and Salmonella, Agricultural Research Service (ARS) scientists report. ARS scientists Donald Thayer, Kathleen Rajkowski and William Fett found that a combined treatment of irradiation and chlorine solution not only killed both organisms, but extended the shelf life. They conducted the studies at the ARS research center in Wyndmoor, Pennsylvania. The research is part of the effort by a task force from several federal government agencies and industry to find ways to control microbial contamination of sprouts. Since 1995, raw alfalfa sprouts have been recognized as a source of foodborne illness in the U.S., with several outbreaks of both E. coli O157:H7 and Salmonella. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have advised those at high risk - including children, the elderly, and persons with compromised immune systems - to avoid eating raw alfalfa sprouts. Since fragile sprouts cannot withstand abrasive physical washing, cleaning the seeds has become the primary focus. In tests, the scientists used the irradiation dose approved for irradiating meat. Along with irradiation, they subjected alfalfa seeds to two percent, 2.5 percent, and three percent weight-per-volume concentrations of calcium hypochlorite (a chlorine source). The 2.5 and three percent concentrations reduced E. coli O157:H7 99.99 percent. The scientists say the best way to eliminate pathogens is a combination of irradiation and chlorine because sprouts can be contaminated internally, which would prevent a surface disinfectant from working effectively.

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STACHYBOTRYS FUNGUS FORCES EVACUATION OF TEXAS FAMILY

Melinda Ballard, a Dripping Springs, Texas resident, wants to warn the world about a fungus called Stachybotrys. Ballard has filed a criminal complaint with the Hays County Sheriff's office against two Farmers Insurance Group employees, claiming the insurance company's personnel was negligent in settling a claim, which resulted in an infestation of her home by the Stachybotrys, which caused her and her family to become sick. "My family and I have been living a nightmare for five months because of Farmers Insurance. Yet Therese McConnell, a Farmers claims adjuster and one of the employees against whom the complaint was filed, was told early-on that delaying the repairs could result in the growth of dangerous mold." The Utah Department of Public Health describes Stachybotrys as "a type of slow growing saprophytic fungus that grows well on materials that have a high cellulose concentration, such as straw, grass, saw dust and lumber. Wet drywall (plaster board) and ceiling tiles. Persons with chronic exposure to the toxin report cold or flu like symptoms with sore throat, diarrhea, headaches, fatigue, dermatitis, intermittent local hair loss and general malaise. The toxins may also suppress the immune system." Ballard says, "We had to evacuate our home last month after tests by microbiologists from Texas Tech University confirmed high levels of this toxin that were airborne and aggressive. The Farmers-hired microbiologist also found Stachybotrys in our home. It's going to cost at least \$1 million just to get personnel trained in hazardous materials handling to come in wearing protective suits and HEPA respirators and remove all the infested building material and take it to a designated disposal area." Ballard said tens of thousands of other people may be suffering from Stachybotrys, but just do not know it.

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OREGON STRUGGLES TO REVERSE WATER CONTAMINATION

The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), working with

local agencies and organizations, has begun a multi-year watershed improvement initiative in the streams and rivers around Oakland and Sutherlin. Like many streams in Oregon, the Calapooya and Sutherlin Creeks have water quality problems that have degraded several uses of the water, from drinking water to fish habitat. DEQ is partnering with both cities, Douglas County, the Soil and Water Conservation District, the Sutherlin Chamber of Commerce, and the Umpqua Watershed Council to make this effort a community based approach. DEQ is currently working with businesses by offering technical assistance that includes waste reduction opportunities. Households can also help keep pollution out of streams by keeping waste out of land-fills, septic systems, and stormwater systems. To help households do more for waste prevention, the local governments, with funding from DEQ, are holding free-of-charge household hazardous waste collection events on June 12 in Roseburg and June 13 in Oakland. The City of Oakland is already working to upgrade its wastewater treatment facility. DEQ is also working with the City of Sutherlin to improve the water quality of Cooper Creek, which is a source of drinking water.

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GET THAT WATER CHESNUT OUT OF MY BAY

It's fine in Chinese food, but not in Chesapeake Bay. To protect public safety and preserve native species in Chesapeake Bay tributaries, the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) will soon begin to remove dense populations of water chestnut from the Sassafras River near Lloyd Creek in Kent County and the Bird River in Baltimore County. Water chestnut is native to Asia. "Water chestnut seeds include four, hard half-inch spines that can penetrate shoes and are large enough to keep people off beaches," said DNR Secretary John Griffin. "This dangerous plant is also an ecological nightmare. It prevents the growth of beneficial aquatic plants and submerged aquatic vegetation, and creates breeding grounds for mosquitoes." The plant was first recorded in the Sassafras River in 1964. "Water chestnut reproduces very rapidly; one acre can produce enough seeds to cover 100 acres the following year," said DNR biologist Mike Naylor. "Seeds can remain viable in sediments for up to 12 years. Based on Maryland's experience, and that of eight other states with water chestnut control programs, scientists agree that if actions are taken now, a much larger problem can be prevented." DNR plans to begin mechanical removal of plants in the Lloyd Creek area of the Sassafras River on June 11. A massive volunteer effort to manually remove plants will follow June 13 and 14. Where mechanical and hand removal are ineffective, the herbicide 2,4-D may be used. "Timing is critical," said Naylor. "There is a tight biological window available before the plants release seeds." Anyone interested in volunteering to help remove plants can contact DNR Tributary Team Coordinator Christy Mills at 410-260-8988 or find out more online at: [21]<http://www.dnr.state.md.us>

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EARTHWATCH TEAM ASSESSES PUERTO RICAN REEFS

Conducting a rapid-assessment baseline to measure the effects of coral diseases, human impacts, and predators on Caribbean coral reefs will be the task of Earthwatch volunteers this summer in the Mayaguez and Mona Islands, of Puerto Rico. In the past 14 months alone, scientists say, 40 percent of the worlds reefs have been subjected to severe bleaching. Changing water temperatures or pollution force symbiotic algae to leave their coral hosts, draining the coral of essential nutrition and leading to the death of entire reefs. Scientists have been finding increased incidents of coral disease all over the world.

But knowledge of modern reefs is only as old as scuba technology, and scientists are still guessing how much of the damage to reefs is caused by humans, or how much is natural, how much is cyclical. Marine biologists Andrew and Robin Bruckner, working with the University of Puerto Rico and the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, are trying to establish such a baseline for two offshore reefs, near Mona and Mayaguez islands, where human impacts are minimal and where the reefs are still untouched. The data they collect will be added to ReefBase, an international coral reef database used by researchers and managers to set up management plans that minimize disease and reduce human impact. Scuba certified Earthwatch volunteers will spend August assisting the Bruckners to document these pristine reefs.

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