

Thank You for using NewsLibrary

KNOXVILLE NEWS-SENTINEL

POOR UPKEEP LED TO K-25 OUTBREAK; DOE CITES MAINTENANCE WOES

Tuesday, July 14, 1998

Section: Business

Page: C1

BY FRANK MUNGER, NEWS-SENTINEL OAK RIDGE BUREAU

OAK RIDGE -- Irregular maintenance in a waste-storage area contributed to conditions that caused an outbreak of respiratory illnesses among several workers at the East Tennessee Technology Park, a Department of Energy review team concluded in its report.

Several employees have missed work because of health problems associated with mold and fungi in the K-25 Building, a mile-long, U-shaped structure where empty vaults are used for storage of toxic wastes. Other workers have donned protective masks because of the poor air quality.

The review team, which included members from Bechtel Jacobs Co., the DOE's environmental contractor, found there was a "lack of clear guidance" on management of shutdown facilities. This led to problems at the K-25 Building, a former uranium-processing unit that has been inactive since the mid-1960s.

"Maintenance activities continue to decrease over time," the team's report said. "Ventilation systems are inactive and metal plates have been welded over ceiling openings in some vaults due to security requirements. The roof is in need of repair, and there is a continual problem with water leaking into the vaults.

"The accumulation of moisture and the lack of ventilation are ideal conditions for the growth of mold, fungi and bacteria."

The review team made recommendations to improve housekeeping and address employee concerns.

"The long-range plan is to vacate the building," the report said, noting that the improvements are interim measures.

The DOE report also said that the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration would conduct a pilot project at the site in July and August, which will include inspection of the vaults.

Environmental activists recently called on DOE to perform a full-blown investigation.

"There is an extensive history of workers experiencing respiratory illnesses," said Janet Michel of the Coalition for a Healthy Environment.

"We want to know why it has taken so long for the K-25 safety and health department to recognize the unhealthy conditions."

All content © 1998 KNOXVILLE NEWS-SENTINEL and may not be republished without permission.

All archives are stored on a SAVE (tm) newspaper library system from MediaStream Inc., a Knight-Ridder Inc. company.