

Local Wednesday

River contaminants at safe levels, officials say

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While the Savannah River contains radioactive waste, mercury, lead and chemicals, federal officials say the concentration of these contaminants are not harming a major source of drinking water for Beaufort County.

Levels of those contaminants have been decreasing over time and are far below levels that would violate safe drinking-water standards, officials said Tuesday.

During a public hearing at the Crowne Plaza Resort on Hilton Head Island, officials from the Savannah River Site discussed tritium levels in the river and the steps being taken to reduce them.

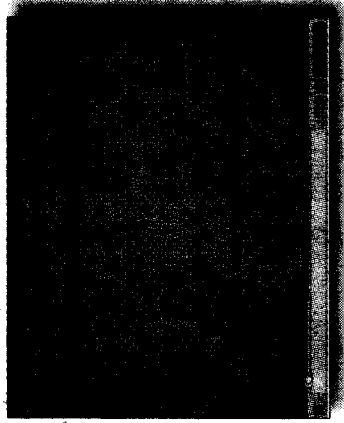
Tritium is a radioactive form of hydrogen used to produce nuclear

WHAT IS TRITIUM?

A radioactive form of hydrogen that occurs naturally but also has been used to make nuclear weapons.

weapons. Tritium has contaminated the groundwater along the river and takes 25 years to fully decompose.

The Savannah River Site was constructed by the U.S. Department of Energy in the 1950s to produce basic materials used to make weapons. At the time, the accepted practice for disposing of radioactive waste was to collect it in a large basin or bury it in underground disposal facilities. These approaches allowed the waste to eventually seep into the ground, said



SRS spokesman Will Callicott.

As technologies advanced and new environmental laws were enacted, SRS changed its methods of disposal. State and federal agencies now regulate how much radioactive material is allowed in the river.

Gerald Blount of the SRS said that in 2003, the site developed a dam-system technology that has reduced

ON THE WEB
Go to islandpacket.com/tritium to see video of officials from the Savannah River Site discuss tritium levels.

tritium levels in the river by more than half. Rather than allowing the water to flow freely into the river, the system uses a tree irrigation method. The trees serve as straws that suck up the contaminated water and release it into the atmosphere, where it evaporates.

Jim Heffner, SRS manager for environmental permitting and monitoring, said the site contributes one-tenth of the amount of tritium allowed in the water. Any fears that current levels of tritium could cause adverse health effects are unfounded, he said.

“We understand the objective is to get back to natural sorts of levels,” he

said. “But mother nature gives people varying amounts of radioactivity exposure, too,” such as smoking, flying in an airplane or living in the mountains.
Joe Whetstone, a Sun City resident who attended the meeting, agrees levels have been decreasing, but thinks standards need to be tougher.
“I think we need to strive for more and be more protective of human health,” he said.

Last fall, Whetstone filed a lawsuit against the Department of Energy after the agency granted SRS more time to dispose of tritium, but did not notify local residents. A settlement was reached in December. Whetstone agreed to drop his suit if the DOE made information accessible to residents of Beaufort and Jasper counties.