

Critics complain water samples at former nuke lab being filtered before testing



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LOS ANGELES – Water samples taken from the site of a former nuclear testing facility are being filtered before they are submitted to radioactivity tests, according to critics of the cleanup effort at Rocketdyne's Santa Susana field laboratory.

As a result, the levels of contamination could be 10 to 15 times higher than what is being recorded by the tests, said Daniel Hirsch, a member of an interagency group monitoring the cleanup.

Rocketdyne's director of safety, health and environmental affairs, called the criticism "sort of a red herring," saying water tested at the site has met all public health standards.

"People should be assured that the water meets all standards to protect public health and the environment," said Steve Lafflam.

To determine how much readings vary between filtered and unfiltered water, Lafflam said regional water quality officials have instructed Rocketdyne to gather water samples during the next six storms and send them to a lab certified by the Environmental Protection Agency. There, both filtered and unfiltered samples will be tested.

Rocketdyne's field lab, located in the hills between Simi Valley and Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley, was used for decades until the 1980s to test rocket engines and perform nuclear tests. The work resulted in a number of spills and accidents over the years, including a partial nuclear reactor meltdown in 1959.

Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., complained about water testing measures at the lab in a letter sent last week to federal Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman.

"In the scientific community, there is also concern that the testing at Rocketdyne has been inadequate, and in some cases, incorrect," Boxer wrote.

Gregg Dempsey, a senior radiation scientist with the EPA in Las Vegas, said filtering water samples before testing them may sometimes be necessary to eliminate large amounts of impurities. But he added that unfiltered samples

are preferred.

"It's not a good way to run water samples," Dempsey said of filtered samples.
"We would call it a biased sample. It's no longer representative of the environment."