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***Poison in the Vadose Zone:  
An examination of the threats to the Snake River Plain aquifer  
from the Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory***

**Statement of Paul Schwartz**

**National Water Policy Coordinator, Clean Water Action  
National Press Club, Washington D.C., October 9, 2001**

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Good morning. My name is Paul Schwartz. I'm Clean Water Action's National Water Policy Coordinator. The second largest unified aquifer in the U.S.A., the Snake River Plain Aquifer, and source of drinking water for over 200,000 Americans is seriously threatened by buried plutonium. This problem though understood for over 25 years by the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) has been largely ignored.

The Institute for Energy and Environmental Research (IEER) has put the country on notice in its groundbreaking report: *Poison in the Vadose Zone: An examination of the threats to the Snake River Plain aquifer from the Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory*. 50 years of dumping radioactive and other wastes at DOE's Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory (INEEL) makes necessary an immediate clean-up by the DOE.

The list of contaminants buried at the site and making their way into the aquifer is truly breath taking: several plutonium isotopes (238, 239/240), americium-241, iodine -129, carbon tetrachloride, trichlorethylene (TCE), tritium, strontium-90, cobalt, hexavalent chromium and gross alpha and gross beta radioactivity. This witches brew of chemical and radioactive wastes is a dangerous mix whose interaction with the environment is little understood.

Activists and policy-makers should pay far more attention to the threat posed to the purity of critical water supplies in the United States by past

radioactive dumping. Clean Water Action is certainly going to do so. There is no room for complacency when it comes to plutonium and americium. Once the aquifer is seriously contaminated with these and other radionuclides, we will be facing a multi-generation pollution problem that will put the health and economy of the region in jeopardy.

As the report demonstrates, DOE has not through self-regulation been able to provide good clean-up results overall. Therefore, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) should be given the legal authority and adequate resources to enforce all environmental laws and to promulgate a strict set of national standards helping DOE to jump start the necessary clean-up.

Clean Water Action will be working closely with IEER in the future to monitor the situation at INEEL and will support a broader effort to look closely at water contamination problems emanating from other sites associated with the DOE weapons complex.

*Clean Water Action is a national organization working to ensure clean, safe and affordable water, prevention of health-threatening pollution and creation of environmentally-safe jobs and businesses. CWA has more than 700,000 members nationwide.*