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P R E S S R E L E A S E

**NUCLEAR WASTE MISMANAGEMENT WOULD
CREATE HIGH-LEVEL RADIOACTIVE WASTE DUMP
IN SAVANNAH RIVER WATERSHED**

**Standards for Drinking Water Contaminated with Radioactive Tritium Need to
be Tightened to Protect Pregnant Women, Developing Fetuses**

**Department of Energy Appears on Course to Abandon Environmental Commitments to Communities,
States, Future Generations**

Washington, D.C. March 11, 2004: Current waste management practices at the Savannah River Site (SRS) nuclear weapons plant, near Aiken, South Carolina, threaten to make the watershed of one of the most important rivers in the southeastern United States into a high-level nuclear waste dump, according to a report issued today by the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research (IEER).

The new report, [*Nuclear Dumps by the Riverside: Threats to the Savannah River from Radioactive Contamination at the Savannah River Site \(SRS\)*](#), also details tritium contamination of the Savannah River and the environmental injustice caused by SRS-related contamination to those who subsist on fish from its waters.

The Savannah River Site in South Carolina produced more than one-third of the plutonium for U.S. nuclear bombs, almost all of the tritium, and other nuclear materials for the U.S. weapons program. Past waste dumping and mismanagement and a failure to implement a sound cleanup plan have created extensive water pollution beneath SRS as well as serious risks for water resources in the region.

"Current cleanup policies at SRS will very likely leave a million or more curies of radioactivity in high-level waste on the Savannah River Site," said Dr. Arjun Makhijani, IEER president and principal author of the report. "The DOE is turning SRS into a *de facto* high-level radioactive waste dump."

"We are going to work in a bi-partisan way in the State of Georgia to hold the federal government's feet to the fire," said State Representative Nan Orrock, Majority Whip (D) of the Georgia House of Representatives. "The Department of Energy simply must not be allowed to put our most precious natural resource -- water -- at risk in this appalling way."

"All that we want is a bi-partisan measure to put back into funding the testing for tritium and other radioactive products in the river," stated Rep. Ron Stephens (R-Savannah, Georgia). "My constituents drink this water."

"There are serious problems that need to be dealt with in an expeditious manner, properly and correctly," said State Senator Regina Thomas (D-Savannah/Chatham, Georgia). "There are contaminants in our water supply and the Department of Energy should create a cleanup plan so as to eliminate pollution of our water."

Tritium, a radioactive isotope of hydrogen, is the most common water pollutant at SRS. "While it is well within federal safe drinking water standards, recent research indicates that tritium standards may not be adequate to protect pregnant women and developing fetuses from adverse health effects," explained Dr. Makhijani. "Tritium can produce multigenerational risks. The federal government needs to recover the buried wastes dumped decades ago that are still polluting the Savannah River, and to tighten tritium standards to protect those most at risk."

The IEER report finds that African Americans who rely on the Savannah River as a primary source of protein -- that is, subsistence fishermen -- are disproportionately affected by the consumption of radioactively-contaminated fish downstream of SRS. They consume about four times more fish than the maximum limit set by the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control.

"We know that people are eating more fish than what is safe -- people of color in particular," said Rev. Charles Utley, Central Savannah River Area campaign director for Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League in Augusta, Georgia. "People whose diets depend on river fish caught downstream of SRS need to be told about the risks of fish consumption. And DOE needs to act to reduce the pollution of the river."

Despite the radioactive threats, the Energy Department has denied a request from the state of Georgia to continue funding radiation monitoring along the Savannah River, calling the state's program "redundant" because South Carolina also has a monitoring program. Unfunded, Georgia's program is set to end April 30, 2004.

"It's simply unacceptable that DOE has cut off environmental monitoring funds for the State of Georgia," said Sara Barczak, Safe Energy Director of Southern Alliance for Clean Energy in Savannah, Georgia. "The DOE has created risks for the people of Georgia and put a burden on

the state and it should step up to the plate and assume its responsibilities by restoring the funds rather than tossing the problem into the laps of communities and state taxpayers."

The IEER report focuses on the daunting problem of managing and implementing a clean-up program for Cold War-era wastes; it does not examine the contamination that will result from new and proposed nuclear weapons or nuclear fuel production programs at SRS, including a tritium separation facility being built there, a proposed plant to make plutonium fuel for reactors, and a proposed plant to mass-manufacture plutonium bomb cores.

"It is unconscionable that this administration is pursuing unneeded, provocative nuclear weapons programs at SRS even before it has cleaned up the mess it created during the Cold War," said Ms. Bobbie Paul, Executive Director of Atlanta Women's Action for New Directions and board member of Georgia Center for Law in the Public Interest. "Worse, the DOE is taking actions that are making the site into a huge, essentially permanent, radioactive waste dump. It should clean up its act and not even think about new bomb plants that would add to the burdens it has already created."