

More Hanford workers tested for exposure to radioactivity carried by fruit flies, gnats

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By John Stang, Herald staff writer

Hanford has checked 104 people for possible exposure to specks of radioactive contaminants believed to be spread by fruit flies and gnats.

That is almost double the 55 that had taken urinalysis tests as of last week.

"They decided to go for every person who could have been exposed," said Fluor Daniel spokeswoman Michele Gerber.

Most of the new people tested were truck drivers.

So far, test results on 62 people have been returned. One person showed a borderline positive reading and has been retested. The result of the new test has not been returned yet, Gerber said.

Meanwhile, Hanford recently opened up a previously roped-off 10-acre area by B Plant that was the main focus for hunting for contaminated insects.

Several trailers and "Conex" buildings - metal storage boxes big enough to walk into - in that area still are off limits awaiting checks by Hanford workers.

Starting in late September, insects apparently have left small spots of strontium contamination - no more than the dose from a dental X-ray - in trash cans and Dumpsters, in at least one garbage truck and in Richland's landfill.

One source of the contamination is likely a valve box for an underground pipe system that carried wastes from B Plant years ago.

But other sources have not been ruled out. The flies and gnats are believed to have been attracted to a sugary substance used as a sealant in that area.

The suspected areas have been sprayed heavily with insecticides.

The last contaminated fly was found in the valve box Oct. 15, with the last contaminated fly found elsewhere Oct. 8.

Meanwhile, the Department of Energy and the city of Richland still are discussing how Hanford's trash should be inspected before it leaves the site for Richland's landfill, said Gerber and Stan Arlt, the city's engineering and utility services director.

Until those talks are done, Hanford is burying its trash on site.