

By Charmaine White Face

There is a situation brewing in western South Dakota that has quite a few people concerned about the safety of soldiers in the SD Army National Guard. It's not that they will be going overseas to fight. Rather, it is that they are in danger right here at home, and the powers that be do not seem to care.

The SD National Guard plans on going into the Buffalo Gap National Grasslands between Highway 44 and Highway 40 in an area that contains naturally occurring uranium. No, this uranium is not deep in the ground, but at or very near the surface and the radiation levels are high.

SD National Guard Captain Ed Cromwell offered to go into the area to get radiation readings after hearing our concerns. Defenders of the Black Hills has been going around western South Dakota checking abandoned open pit uranium mines for years. We have been in areas with levels that are four times higher than Fukushima, Japan. We work with a Nuclear Physics professor from the University of Michigan regarding our findings, as well as Professor Hannon LaGarry, Ph. D. in Geology, the head of the Math and Science Department at Oglala Lakota College.

The levels Capt. Cromwell was reading were in milliRems per hour, while our calibrator works with the much smaller microRems per hour. So when his highest reading was 0.25 milliRems per hour, he wasn't that concerned. However, that was 250 microRems per hour in our calculations and rather high. When you consider that an x-ray is the equivalent of 15 microRems per hour, and you're only exposed for a second, then 250 microRems per hour is alarming.

Now, the reason for the concern for the South Dakota soldiers is because they will be in those areas for 24 hours per day for a month at least; sleeping, eating, working, breathing in the dust. When you do the math, they will be exposed to 180,000 microRems in that month, or the equivalent of 12,000 x-rays. That's a lot of nuclear radioactivity which can cause cancer and change their DNA.

We let the SD National Guard and the Nebraska National Forest know of our concerns last summer when they were doing their Environmental Assessment. They said they would put water on the roads to hold down the dust. Radioactivity will not be held down by water. If that was so, there would be little concern about radioactivity any place in the world.

As the Governor is the Commander in Chief of the SD National Guard, we gathered hundreds of signatures on petitions to give to him to show the peoples concern for the soldiers. But his scheduler would never allow us the opportunity to meet with Governor Daugaard to present our concerns. She also wouldn't allow Tom Emmanuel, the Executive Director of South Dakota Peace and Justice, an opportunity to speak with the Governor about this issue either.

Finally, an email was sent to the Governor. He responded in a letter and said we could present our concerns in the Environmental Assessment. Either someone isn't telling the Governor that the Environmental Assessment is done, or the Governor is of the same opinion that 180,000 microRems of radioactivity will not harm South Dakota soldiers.

Someone needs to warn the soldiers. When alpha radiation enters the body, in this case, through the dust, it doesn't leave the body, it continues to accumulate. It can enter by breathing. It can enter through the mouth, the eyes, the ears, or a small cut or crack in the skin. It can land on a canteen and be swallowed in the water. But there is not just alpha radiation in this area. The 13 decay products of the naturally occurring uranium are 85% more radioactive with beta and gamma radiation as well.

Just because I'm an Indian woman doesn't mean this is an Indian issue. This is a human being issue, and we are concerned for all the soldiers of the South Dakota Army National Guard.

If the Governor doesn't believe the concerns of Defenders of the Black Hills and the South Dakota Peace and Justice Center, then he should have a study done by an independent source regarding the radioactive levels in that area using microRems per hour before soldiers are allowed to go into that area. He should also find out what prolonged exposure to low doses of radioactivity will do to human beings. He will find that doctors and scientists all over the world are saying, No dose is safe.

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