

Denver's Radioactive Secret

Between the jagged flatirons and the vibrant red rocks of Colorado lies a radioactive secret. A nuclear site turned into hiking site between the outskirts of Boulder and Golden holds a legacy over the surrounding towns. Starting in 1952 and ending in 1989 Rocky Flats workers used plutonium to make nuclear weapon triggers. It later was shut down in a 1989 FBI raid when they found environmental crimes occurring at the site.

According to George L. Volez, a researcher at Los Alamos Laboratory, Plutonium has a half-life of 24,000 years. His studies show a correlation between low plutonium exposure and cancer rates, but cannot prove causation because of the many factors that lead to Cancer. Out of the three types of plutonium exposure, inhalation, ingestion, and absorption, inhalation produces the most risk for lung cancer. This is the most common cause of plutonium contamination in people who do not work in plutonium plants.

The Colorado Center Cancer Registry at the Department of Public Health and Environment reports that radioactive waste contains potential cancer causing particles. The type of radiation from Rocky Flats would cause several types of rare cancers including esophagus, stomach, colon, rectum, liver, lung, prostate, bone, leukemia, lymphomas, and brain and central nervous system. Margaret Ruttenber, a researcher of cancer rates in surrounding areas stated, "The study conducted by the department found no evidence of higher than expected forms of rare cancer in the immediate vicinity of Rocky Flats or the Denver Metro Area." However, the study did conclude that rates of male prostate cancer in Wheat Ridge were higher than normal. While this could link back to Rocky Flats other factors such as diet, smoking, alcohol use and obesity also contribute to prostate cancer.

Cristina Heim, 53-year-old women who grew up in Wheat Ridge, explains that the Rocky Flats area always held a negative legacy, "When we were kids our parents and friends would always joke around and tell us not to wander around Rocky Flats area." Heim continues to state, "Even to this day I can't image why people would choose to live that close to an area if they knew about the accident."

The opening of Rocky Flats hiking and biking trail remains controversial. While many have chosen to opt out of visiting Rocky Flats, others seem not to mind the consequences of the radiation at all. While the presence of plutonium in Rocky Flats remains clear, the attitudes towards the area remain debated throughout the state.

Story Memo

Sources:

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