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Department 'de-cons' campus

Radiation only a small hazard

By Doug Levy
Of the Emerald

Put Ed Bailey at the head of the group of people who hate to hear about radiation leaks.

Bailey is the head of the Department of Environmental Safety, which is responsible to clean up such leaks.

While the department's major chore is to preserve the environmental quality of the University campus, it also disposes radioactive material and in the rare instances when they occur, cleans up radioactive spills.

Bailey cringes when he's asked about those instances.

"Spills are made out to be far more than what they are. We had one a couple of months after I got here and the newspapers blew it out of proportion. As far as a health hazard, they're minimal," Bailey says.

"We've had a couple of spills since then, and I think we've made progress in that people have reported them. Before, people used to try to clean them up without reporting them, and we'd find out about the spill and discover it wasn't cleaned up properly.

Aside from radiation spills and waste disposal, the department has other purposes. For that reason the name was changed in 1980 from the Department of Radiation Safety to its present name. Bailey, a radiation physicist, acts as the health physicist and manager of the department.

Bailey and his small staff check for air contaminants that threaten worker safety (including wood, lead, asbestos and carbon monoxide), take samples of possible contaminants, dispose of radioactive waste and train staff members to handle contaminants.

But unless you spend a lot of time in the science buildings, you probably haven't heard of the department or of Bailey.

"It's amazing how very few people know we exist," Bailey says. "People just don't think about these things."

Like most of the other departments at the University, the department is limited to keeping the University contamination-free on a minimal budget, about \$10,000 a year, according to Bailey. "We're a group that wants to identify environmental concerns, but has to rely on supervisors to tell us the problems."

"It's ridiculous to think that administrators who don't have all the knowledge of environmental problems can identify all these problems," Bailey says. Yet, with a limited budget, and assisted only by chemist Clay Carey (who will soon resign) and part-time management assistant



Emerald Photo

This danger sign is one of the few visible clues to the existence of the Department of Environmental Safety.

Fred Scalise, Bailey realizes the futility of the department surveying every environmental hazard on its own. "It's impossible for a 1 1/2 to 2 man office to survey all these things," he admits.

Another thing eating at the budget is that the department takes care of waste disposal and provides geiger instruments, radiation detecting instruments and calibration instruments for no charge. "It's unrealistic," Bailey says.

Bailey's office is full of gadgets to detect environmental hazards, including a mercury vapor sniffer, an atmospheric explosives detector, a gas flow proportional counter and a floor monitor that looks like an electronic vacuum cleaner.

All the instruments are used to discover contaminants. "Once we've discovered contamination, we want to see if it is removable," Bailey says.

Downstairs, barrels of radioactive waste and isotopes abound. Some of the wastes are sent to a waste site in Washington and some are simply incinerated.

A new building being constructed will have additional office space for the department, as well as a waste packing area, a chemical waste room, compactors, fume hoods and a decontamination shower for the people who discovered contaminants.

Other problems Bailey must cope with are the lack of awareness of chemicals on campus and the inability of the department to test for all environmental hazards due to a lack of money. But the philosophy of the department remains the same. Carey enters the office and says, "Worker safety and student safety are what we strive for. If someone has a problem, they should come to us — that's why we're here."

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