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Leak at Reed reactor under investigation



PORTLAND (AP) — Reed College may have to release more radioactive gas into the air to find the source of a leak in its nuclear reactor, a spokesman for the federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission said Monday.

Greg Cook said specialists from the federal agency ran tests Monday at Reed, a private liberal arts college in residential southeast Portland. The two-person NRC team was working to estimate the amount of radioactive gas released during a weekend accident.

"We know that the numbers are going to wind up in the extremely low radiation levels," Cook said. "We're confident of that, but we have to run the numbers anyway."

He said Saturday afternoon's accident posed no threat to the public.

Experts believe radioactive gases leaked through a microscopic hole in one of the reactor's 60 fuel rods. The reactor is immersed in a 25-foot-deep pool of water in a campus building.

The gases bubbled to the surface and escaped into the reactor room, setting off alarms. A ventilation system automatically sealed the building, but not before some radioactive gases leaked into the air.

The student operators immediately shut down the reactor. Radiation levels in the reactor room returned to normal levels Sunday afternoon.

Cook said radioactive gases accumulate under normal operating conditions inside the fuel rods. To pinpoint which fuel rod leaked, the school may have to restart the reactor, generating more radioactive gas, he said.

Through a process of elimination, experts then would zero in on the leaking fuel rod. In the meantime, Cook said, minute amounts of radiation probably would be vented into the air.

Cook said the college would look into alternatives to restarting the reactor to track the leak. The final plan will be submitted to the NRC before tests go forward, he said.

A college spokeswoman, Harriet Watson, said neighbors had expressed some concern about the accident but did not appear overwrought.

"They appreciate that we are being appropriately concerned as well," she said.

The 23-year-old reactor is about the size of a washing machine. Its output is 250,000 watts, far less than the 33 million watts generated by a typical commercial reactor.

Cook said the highest radiation levels measured in the reactor room were a tenth of a millirem per hour. Airline passengers are exposed to three millirems on a cross-country flight, he said.

Reed is the only undergraduate college in the country with its own reactor. Known as a TRIGA Mark I, the reactor is used for research and education.

