

# Environmental Earth News

## SPUD'S WILDLIFE COLUMN



### Nuclear Free America Consumer Alert: RADIOACTIVE SMOKE DETECTORS

Most Americans probably assume that their homes are free of radioactive material. Not so! Nuclear Free America warns consumers that the vast majority of home smoke detectors in use today contain a highly toxic radioactive material. To see if your smoke detector is among them, check for the words "americium-241" or "Am-241" in fine print on the back or inside of the detector.

This radioactive material, which is contained between thin layers of gold and silver foil, can be released into the environment if the detector is tampered with, damaged due to fire, crushed in disposal or incinerated. While the amount of americium-241 contained in each detector is quite small — in the range of 1 to 5 microcuries — it is more than enough to cause cancer if inhaled or ingested.

Nuclear Free America is concerned also about the larger threat posed to human beings and the environment by the production and disposal of radioactive smoke detectors in the aggregate. The Am-241 they contain is created as a by-product of plutonium-241 in special nuclear weapons "production reactors" run in the U.S. by the Department of Energy. The continued operation of these reactors is fraught with hazard and only compounds the myriad of unsolved problems associated with the nuclear industry — from uranium mining and milling to nuclear waste generation and disposal.

While radioactive smoke detectors have an operating life of about 10 years, the half-life of the americium-241 they contain (the time required for half of the radioactivity to decay) is 456 years! This means that it will take thousands of years for the radioactivity in discarded smoke detectors to completely decay. This disposal problem is further complicated by the fact that the decay of Am-241 in turn creates several new toxic radioactive elements.\*

Only "ionizing" type smoke detectors, however, require radioactive material. Nuclear Free America is pleased to inform consumers that nuclear-free alternatives — which are actually more reliable — do exist. "Photoelectric" type detectors, for example, which use a beam of light to detect smoke particles, are available in both 9-volt battery and 120-volt AC models.

Compared with radioactive detectors that rely on a beam of ionized air, most photoelectric detectors are less sensitive to humidity and cooking smoke — which means fewer annoying false alarms — and more sensitive to the larger smoke particles — which means faster detection of smoldering fires, the most common and deadly of all household fires. Studies published by the Fire Journal of the National Fire Protection Association and an independent consumer product testing organization show that photoelectric detectors are 24 to 68 minutes faster in detecting smoke from these kinds of fires, while being just 3 to 33 seconds slower in detecting smoke from less common, fast flaming fires.

Unfortunately for most consumers, however, photoelectric detectors are not easy to find. Most retail stores sell only the ionizing type, because they are less expensive (since the radioactive material they contain is heavily subsidized by the federal government) and more widely promoted by leading brands.

\*Am-241 emits both alpha and gamma radiation, with characteristic energies of 5.4 MeV and .06 MeV respectively. The radioactive daughters formed by the decay of Am-241 include Neptunium 237, Protactinium 233, Uranium 233, Thorium 227, Thorium 230, Actinium 226, Radium 226, Francium 223, Astatine 217 and Bismuth 213.

## HEALING GLOBAL WOUNDS

On October second, Donna Osburn leads us to Western Shoshone Territory, to Nevada and a nuclear test site, and to Las Vegas. She joins a ten-day Indigenous Forum and Ceremony called Healing Global Wounds, hosted by the Global Anti-Nuclear Alliance and the Western Shoshone National Council.

The Treaty of Ruby Valley provided for "definite acknowledgment...of the boundaries of the entire country that they claim." They being the Newe (Western Shoshone), the treaty was approved in 1863 when Lincoln's government needed safe passage for California's gold across the 24,000,000 acre Shoshone Territory. This was three years after the discovery of gold and silver in Nevada. Within a decade of the treaty, many Shoshone were starving, their land taken simply and violently.

There are still some people on this planet whose family is always with them, even when they are alone, or lost, because they live with the earth and sky, and their people have since the beginning. Generations upon generations have lived in thoughtful balance as part of the world, and it is perhaps art and magic and science and spirit to them. You and I cannot put on this knowledge like an elk shirt. We can only guess, and wonder at those who live and die with this other, greater Mother.

"The land to the traditional Shoshone is sacred; it is the basis for our lives. To take away the land is to take away the lives of the people." Raymond Yowell, WSSLA, 1980

It is these people who feel the desecration before the rest of us when the earth and sky are sickened. They see and hear and sense the signs because they can (and we cannot), and because they are there.

Countries with nuclear capabilities seem to find the lands of native peoples convenient for testing nuclear devices. The Soviets have tested in Kazakhstan and Novaya Zemlya; China on the lands of the Uygur; France tests in Polynesia; Great Britain first tested on Aboriginal land in Australia and now joins the United States in testing on Western Shoshone land in Nevada.

In spring of 1954, in response to the Viet Minh siege of Dien Bien Phu, Admiral Arthur Radford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, proposed using tactical atomic weapons to relieve the French. Discouraging the idea, General MacArthur wrote to Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, saying, among other things, that the Soviet propaganda machine would evidence "our desire to use such weapons in Indochina as proof of the fact we were testing out weapons on native peoples." This began on Western Shoshone land in 1951.

The events which Donna will join include, according to the sponsors, an Indigenous People's Forum with indigenous testimony and presentations, indigenous and disarmament workshops, skills sharing, strategy discussions and multi-cultural celebration, a demonstration at the Nevada Test Site Operations Office in Las Vegas, the final 4-day, 65 mile completion of two, 3000 mile continental Walks Across

America to the Nevada Test Site, an encampment in the desert adjacent to the Nevada Test Site, a native-led Healing Ceremony, a multi-cultural rally, Mass Nonviolent Direct Action, and more.

This October, while some celebrate the 500 years since the European invasion, others mourn. The purpose statement from the Walk Across America says, in part:

"We seek to understand American history from the perspective of American Indians, African-Americans, Asian-Americans, political prisoners, and all other oppressed people. We support all indigenous people's rights to the use of and title to their own lands. We support the demands of Native Nations to receive a voice in the United Nations. We look toward indigenous cultures to offer us practical knowledge which could help us secure the future of all life."

That last sentence might be reason enough to show our support and to support Donna's participation. The events:

Oct 2-4 Indigenous Peoples Forum, Las Vegas

Oct 5 Demonstration at the Test Site Operations Office

Oct 5-9 Join European Peace Pilgrimage & Walk Across America for Mother Earth for the 65-mile completion of their 3000-mile, 8-month walks.

Oct 6-12 Nevada Test Site Encampment

Oct 10 Native-led Healing Ceremony

Oct 11 Multi-cultural Rally and Mass Nonviolent Action

Oct 12 500 years Commemoration

Those who wish more information may contact:

Western Shoshone National Council PO Box 140115, Duckwater, NV 89314

American Peace Test PO Box 26725, Las Vegas NV 89126, (702)386-9834

Citizen Alert PO Box 1681, Las Vegas NV 89125, (702)648-8982

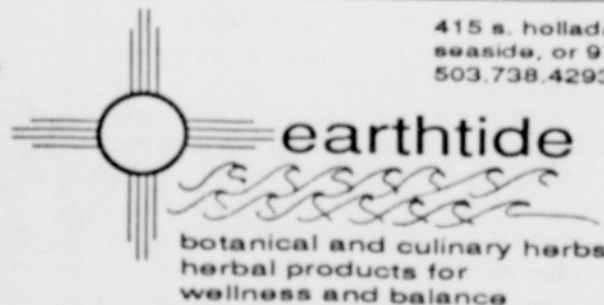
Nevada Desert Experience PO Box 4487, Las Vegas, NV 89127 (702)646-4814

"Do not believe anything simply because you have heard it. Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations. Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books. Do not believe in anything merely on the the authority of your teachers and elders. But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of all, then accept it and live up to it."

That's what the Buddha said.

"All it takes for evil to win is for good men to do NOTHING!"

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