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The Nuclear Neighborhood

By KELLY MCMASTERS
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AT the geographic center of Long Island, just before the fish tail splits, three plumes of radioactive tritium snake through the earth. These plumes extend from soil beneath Brookhaven National Laboratory, where they originated during experiments involving one of the lab's nuclear reactors in the late 1990s, and travel by groundwater east and south.

The United States Department of Energy, which owns the Brookhaven lab, recently posted a legal notice in local newspapers requesting public comment on some options for cleanup. The department offered five plans for the public to consider, from simply monitoring the plumes to digging up the contaminated soil and shipping it to an undisclosed location. The department recommends monitoring to be sure the plumes shrink over the next decade as predicted. And if they don't? "Additional actions will be evaluated."

The department's notice directed readers to a Web site. Two maps there are particularly educational. The first is called Operable Units and Areas of Concern. It highlights 30 sites on the lab's campus, including Graphite Research Reactor spill sites, a Building 830 pipe

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leak and a Particle Beam Dump. There is also the 123-acre stand of pines and oaks known as the Gamma Forest, which was irradiated with cesium-137 between 1961 and 1979 in order to research the effects of radiation on plants.

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In other words, the map charts decades of accidental leaks and spills and intentional releases of radiation, most of which issued from the site's two decommissioned reactors. (Two other reactors remain operational.)

The second map outlines groundwater flow from the lab; two bright blue arrows point east toward the Hamptons, and six point south directly at Shirley, a mostly blue-collar community to the south that shares the Hamptons' beautiful coastline but none of their social cachet.

I grew up in Shirley. As a child there in the 1980s, I was fascinated by the lab, partly because the neighborhood fathers who worked there — most of them in support and service positions — traded jokes about glowing in the dark. Today, the jokes have turned sour.

A class action lawsuit has been filed against the Brookhaven lab, and most of the plaintiffs are from the Shirley area. The complaints range from depressed real estate values as a result of living in a contaminated area to the claim that cancers and other illnesses have resulted from the laboratory's pollution. A children's cancer cluster — by 2000 there were 19 children in the area afflicted by a rare soft-tissue cancer — rings the lab like a necklace.

The plaintiffs' lawyer is Richard J. Lippes, who fought and won the Love Canal case near Buffalo in the 1970s. The Shirley case has been going on for more than a decade already. During that time, the lab has managed to clean up almost all of the nuclear and chemical pollution flowing east toward the Hamptons while largely ignoring Shirley.

When Brookhaven was constructed in 1947, Shirley didn't exist; most of the East End of Long Island was covered in potato farms and brush. It was this isolation — the thick cover of pines and distance from large populations — that made the site attractive to scientists engaged in such inherently dangerous research.

Sixty years later, the laboratory is still hidden away in the middle of the Pine Barrens, but beneath it lies an aquifer that is one of the nation's largest single sources of drinking water, serving nearly three million people.

I understand that the lab is worthy of celebration — six Nobel Prizes have been won by scientists associated with Brookhaven. I also understand that much of the work the lab conducts, including medical research into addiction and cancer, is vitally important. But over the six decades the lab has been on Long Island, a dense population has crowded around it.

Meanwhile, the lab released radioactive tritium, cesium, europium, radium, strontium, plutonium and several known carcinogens into the environment. Cancer rates on Long Island have soared without explanation. For many of these cancers, including breast cancer, the only proven cause, aside from genetic predisposition, is exposure to radiation.

With all that in mind, I would like to suggest my own plan for Brookhaven's cleanup. Let's call it Option 6: Close the remaining two nuclear reactors on the Brookhaven National Laboratory property. It is time.

Nuclear reactors made sense in the 1940s when most of Long Island was brush and pines. But it makes no sense to house them in a dense residential area where so many lives are at risk and mistakes — radioactive, potentially cancer-causing mistakes — continue to be made. Shut them down.

Kelly McMasters, who teaches creative writing at Columbia, is writing a book about the hamlet of Shirley.

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