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Government Under Fire as Radiation Is Found in Milk, Rain

Federal officials have still not published any official data on nuclear fallout from Japan disaster
By: [John Upton](#)

Radiation from Japan rained on Berkeley during recent storms at levels that exceeded drinking water standards by 181 times and has been detected in multiple milk samples, but the U.S. government has still not published any official data on nuclear fallout here from the Fukushima disaster.

Dangers from radiation that is wafting over the United States from the Fukushima power plant disaster and [falling with rain](#) have been downplayed by government officials and others, who say its impacts are so fleeting and minor as to be negligible.



But critics say an absence of federal data on the issue is hampering efforts to develop strategies for preventing radioactive isotopes from accumulating in the nation's food and water supplies.

Three weeks after the Fukushima nuclear power plant began spewing radiation into the world's air, the U.S. government still has not revealed the amount of iodine-131 or other radioactive elements that have fallen as precipitation or made their way into milk supplies or drinking water.

“The official mantra from a lot of folks in government is, ‘Oh, it’s OK in low levels,’” said Patty Lovera, a Washington-based assistant director at the nonprofit Food and Water Watch.

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“But low levels add up. We would like to see a more coherent strategy for monitoring air and water in agricultural areas and then using that data to come up with a plan, if you need one, to go look at the food system.”

Radiation falling with rain can cover grass that is eaten by cows and other animals. It can also fall on food crops or accumulate in reservoirs that are used for irrigation or drinking water. Seafood can also be affected.

Food and Water Watch [sent a letter to President Barack Obama](#) and members of his cabinet and Congress on Thursday urging the federal government to improve its monitoring of radiation in agricultural land and food in the wake of the Japanese tragedy.

“The three agencies that monitor almost all of the food Americans eat ... have insisted that the U.S. food supply is safe,” the letter states. “The agencies, however, have done very little to detail specific ways in which they are responding to the threat of radiation in food.”

Cancer-causing radiation from Japan is circling the world, traveling quickly on jet streams high in the atmosphere and falling with rain. It is being detected in air, water and milk throughout the United States by local and state agencies.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which regulates food safety, referred questions about potential milk contamination to the federal Environmental Protection Agency, which is taking the lead on testing dairy products for radiation.

The EPA on Tuesday [said it expected to release results](#) of tests for radioactivity in rain and snow within a day or so. On Friday, three days after making that pledge, EPA officials repeated the same statement and said the data would likely be released over the weekend or on Monday.

"We have accelerated our precipitation and drinking water sampling and expect to have results in the coming days," EPA spokesman Brendan Gilfillan said in a statement.

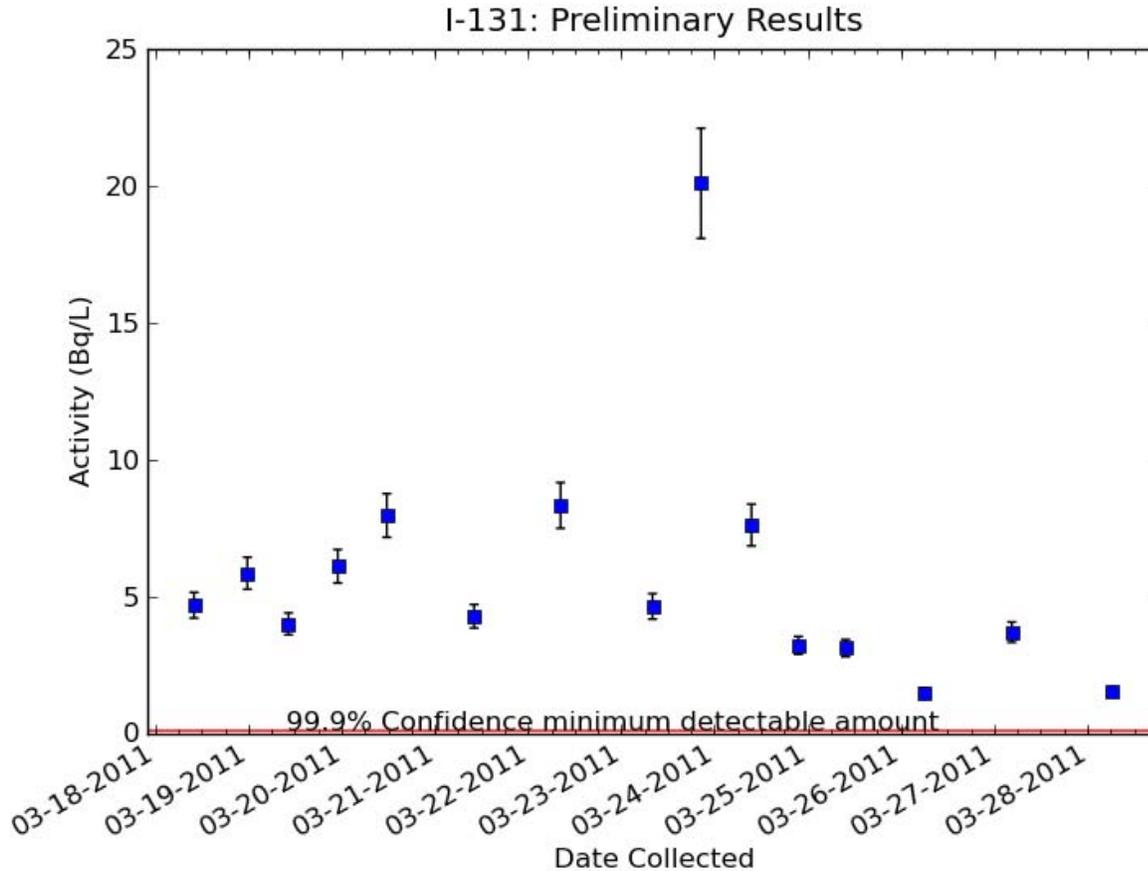
The EPA's tardy response to widespread alarm about radiation in rain and the air has been sharply criticized by Daniel Hirsch, a nuclear policy lecturer at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

"It's troubling that the EPA has to date not provided any precipitation data of its own, while measurements that have been made by states and others across the country are indicating somewhat surprising elevations of iodine-131," Hirsch said Friday.

A rooftop water monitoring program managed by UC Berkeley's Department of Nuclear Engineering detected substantial spikes in rain-borne iodine-131 during torrential downpours a week ago.

As shown in the graph below, [published by UC Berkeley](#), Iodine-131 peaked at 20.1 becquerels per liter, a measure of radioactivity, on the roof of Etcheverry Hall during heavy rains a week ago. The federal maximum level of iodine-131 allowed in drinking water is 0.111 becquerels per liter.





The levels exceeded federal drinking water thresholds, known as maximum contaminant levels, or MCL, by as much as 181 times. However, the material has a half-life of eight days, meaning it breaks down quickly, and it quickly dissipates in the environment. Drinking water safety standards are based on prolonged exposures.

"Now, it isn't drinking water, and the MCL can be averaged for a period of up to a year," Hirsch said. "But it is striking that rainwater could be measured in Berkeley with radioiodine that is that far above the level you would generally be permitted to drink."

The material, which is one of the most toxic radioactive elements spewed when nuclear power plants melt down, is being ingested by cows, which are passing it through into their milk.

The UC Berkeley researchers [also discovered trace levels](#) of iodine-131 and other radioactive materials believed to have originated in Japan in commercially available milk and in a local stream.

Low levels of iodine-131 were detected by state officials this week in [milk harvested from San Luis Obispo](#). Milk from that region is tested frequently for radioactive material because its located near the Diablo Canyon nuclear power plant.

"It's absolutely no public health risk," California Department of Public Health spokesman Mike Sicilia said.

[Similar readings have been reported](#) in milk from Spokane, Washington.

Additionally, EPA air monitoring stations have detected airborne radioactive material believed to have blown across the Pacific Ocean from Japan at levels that federal officials insist are harmless.