

Dead Ducks at City Park

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Back in 1994 the DOE admitted that more than a ton of plutonium was missing from Rocky Flats. A piece of the Rocky Flats story that has been under-reported is that some of that missing plutonium was dumped at the Lowry Landfill southeast of Denver, though Lowry was never licensed for disposal of radionuclides.

When our staff member Adrienne Anderson was teaching environmental studies at the University of Colorado, she and her students found documents that show extraordinarily high concentrations not only of plutonium but also of tritium and other radioactive materials in the environment at the Lowry Landfill.

Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Eileen Welsome gave a detailed account of what Anderson and her students had found in a series of articles on the Lowry Landfill published in *Westword* in April 2001 (see http://www.westword.com/special_reports/lowry/index.html). In researching her articles, Welsome uncovered additional documents that corroborate the findings of Anderson and her students. Her articles underscore the fact that very large quantities of radioactive materials are present at the Lowry Landfill. Of course radioactive materials are by no means the only toxins at Lowry. Welsome refers to an extensive inventory of other contaminants that were dumped at Lowry.

In 1984 Lowry Landfill, which is owned by the City and County of Denver and operated for the city by Waste Management, Inc., was placed on the EPA's National Priorities List of Superfund sites. According to the "cleanup" plan that was eventually developed for this Superfund site, a permit issued to the City and County of Denver and Waste Management allows radioactive toxins present in the Landfill to be flushed through urban sewer lines to a sewage treatment facility run by Metro Wastewater in Commerce City. The flushing, which began on July 5, 2000, will continue for 50 years.

Lowry Landfill is the only place in the United States where a permit has been issued to allow plutonium and other nuclear waste to be released from a Superfund site and transported several miles through urban sewer lines for end-use as farm fertilizer and recycled water to irrigate lawns and recreation areas and fill lakes in public parks. This is unprecedented. Nothing like it is happening anywhere else in the country.

To bring this back to the dead ducks, Lloyd Hesser, one of Welsome's sources, worked for a company that transported liquid waste in big stainless steel tankers

("milk trucks") to Lowry Landfill from various plants in the Denver area, including Rocky Flats. He told Welsome about a vast pit at Lowry where they'd dump their loads. "We could get about eight or ten trucks backed up to it at one time," he said. "We'd back in there and pull the cord. You ought to have seen that pit. The ducks would land and it would kill them instantly."

We shouldn't assume that whatever killed those ducks back then is now in the water at Ferril Lake. The plutonium in the Landfill that is moved through sewer lines to Metro Wastewater's Commerce City facility isn't likely to be present in the water piped to Ferril Lake and City Park. Because the plutonium is heavy and insoluble and attaches to organic matter, it should end up in the sludge that, as explained by Welsome, gets trucked about 50 miles east of Denver to be used as fertilizer on agricultural land near Deer Trail.

But the absence of plutonium in the water piped to Ferril Lake doesn't mean the absence of radioactive materials. Helen Caldicott, an Australian physician who founded Physicians for Social Responsibility, recently commented on the radioactive materials that are now present in recycled water being released from Metro Wastewater for use in recreational areas like City Park and Ferril Lake. Her biggest concern is tritium, a radioactive form of hydrogen. Tritium is soluble. It dissolves in water and there's no way for Metro Wastewater to separate it from the liquid in which it appears. It goes wherever the water goes. Also, in the short term it is far more radioactive than plutonium. It's therefore a particularly dangerous material to be contained in the water at places like Ferril Lake and City Park. Certainly Ferril Lake and City Park should be tested for tritium.