

PINE RIDGE HEALTH INVESTIGATION: Health Problems Proven

In a one month period in late 1979, 14 women or 38% of the pregnant women on the Pine Ridge Reservation miscarried. Medical personnel were concerned. The people of the reservation were concerned.

That incident brought to a head health issues that had been developing for some time among the Lakota people. The elders said that cancer was a "white man's disease" - that it had not existed in previous generations. Yet each family seemed to have had at least one death due to the disease in the present generation. Heart problems and respiratory problems seemed to be on the rise. Birth defects - club feet, heart defects, cleft palate - were noticed increasingly. The rate of complications of pregnancy seemed higher... and miscarriages were forcing the birth rate down.

Women of All Red Nations, a grassroots organization of Indian women, began a health investigation. Random interviews of Pine Ridge families were done and compared with a similar group of families on the Cheyenne River Reservation in northern South Dakota. The Pine Ridge interviews revealed a rate of cancer, heart ailments, and miscarriage far greater than the Cheyenne River group. Water samples from the Cheyenne River and a subsurface source at the Pine Ridge community of Red Shirt, tested at a Rapid City lab revealed a gross alpha radioactivity level of 19 and 15 picocuries, respectively. Federal safety regulations state that a reading greater than 5 picocuries is considered dangerous to life.

These results confirmed fears held by the Lakota people since uranium mining and development had begun in the southern Black Hills, just 75 to 100 miles west of the reservation. Would they suffer from the radioactive wastes and effects of this industry? It is well documented, that on June 11, 1962, 200 tons of radioactive mill tailings at the uranium mill in Edgemont, South Dakota washed into the Cheyenne River and traveled into the Angostera Reservoir. The Cheyenne River flows from this Reservoir down through the Hills and across the reservation. The Cheyenne passes within a few hundred feet of the Red Shirt well where the contaminated water sample was

taken. That well supplies water to the community .

Also in question is the purity of the Arikaree and Ogalala aquifers which provide ground water for the reservation and its people. These aquifers, which extend under a large area of southwestern South Dakota, may be affected by exploratory drilling being done by energy corporations in the area. Such drilling may expose water supplies to veins of uranium and the emission of radon gas, a radioactive uranium by-product which dissolves easily in water.

Many people on the reservation also believe that the U.S. Gunnery Range, an area of the reservation retained by the U. S. Air Force, is being used as a nuclear and chemical waste dump. They question the impact that this might be having on their water, air, and health.

In March, 1980, W.A.R.N. demanded immediate alternative sources of water for the Pine Ridge reservation until the source of these health problems and water contamination could be isolated and averted. The Environmental Protection Agency, Indian Health Service and the Bureau of Indian Affairs all denied their request. The Indian Health Service, responsible by federal statute for protection of Indian health, denied the existence of any health-problem.

W.A.R.N. investigators, however, obtained IHS records and statistics under the Freedom of Information Act which revealed rates of miscarriage on Pine Ridge seven times the national average and infant mortality rates at more than twice the national rate.

Dr. Jeffrey Olenick, a physician at the Pine Ridge IHS hospital, reported unusual excessive bleeding after miscarriages of Pine Ridge women and called for a comprehensive health study. Ann Corral, Director of Field Health Nursing at the hospital cited high cancer and diabetes rates among the elderly and high rates of reproductive cancer. In an interview with W.A.R.N. attorney Jacqueline Huber, IHS Aberdeen area Acting Director Dr. E.S. Rabeau, mentioned high rates of bone cancer on the reservation. (Experts cite bone marrow and reproductive organ tissue as the most sensitive to develop cancer as a result of contact with radiation).

Preliminary water tests done by IHS using EPA taken water samples revealed gross alpha levels in wells in Oglala and Manderson also above federal maximum safety levels and thus there is no cause for concern. The people remain unconvinced and ask why these health

problems exist and what relationship they have to high gross alpha and uranium levels in the water. EPA has responded that it will monitor the water for one year and then determine what action should be taken.

W.A.R.N. investigators have now revealed new causes for concern for water contamination on the reservation. Toxic chemicals 2-4D and 2-4-5T are used widely in the Pine Ridge area. One of the active ingredients, dioxin, has been shown to have caused impotency, respiratory and nerve disorders, and cancer in military veterans exposed to it during the Vietnam War. "1080", another extremely toxic chemical, has been recommended for prairie dog control on the reservation by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Toxaphene, a poison that may bring on brain hemorrhage or cancer of the liver, is rumored to be used as a grasshopper spray on the reservation. Engineers at the Indian Health Service have admitted that many wells on Pine Ridge are improperly capped and that, as a result, any of these surface contaminants could filter down into water supplies or, of course, contaminate surface waters.

In June of 1980, IHS revealed water test results for the Pine Ridge community of Slim Buttes (another western community) which indicate gross alpha levels three times the federal safety maximum. IHS has agreed to drill a new well for that community. The sewage system at the town of Pine Ridge has backed up, dumping raw sewage into area streams.

Alternative water supplies have yet not been received and are still being demanded. IHS claims lack of money to provide this water or to establish a preventive health study or program at Pine Ridge. The Aberdeen Area Office, however, admits having turned one million dollars in unused monies back to the U.S. Government in the last fiscal year.

Due to local dissatisfaction with the response of federal agencies, W.A.R.N. is presently organizing an independent comprehensive investigation by medical and environmental experts into the health problems on Pine Ridge, their causes, and their relationship to environmental contaminants on the reservation. Also in response to local concerns, the reservation tribal government has appointed a tribal water quality investigator and has created a legal project to work toward the return of the Gunnery Range area of the reserva-

tion. It is hoped that with or without federal agency support, the people

will have answers to their questions and health problems soon.