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EPA: No arsenic link seen in Fallon

Researchers' survey of 905 long-term residents provides no insight into cancer cluster

By **BRENDAN RILEY**
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FALLON -- Federal researchers said Wednesday a study of 905 long-term residents of this rural Nevada town revealed no unusually high cancer rates despite high levels of naturally occurring arsenic that had persisted for years.

The Environmental Protection Agency researchers also said at a town hall meeting that their study had nothing to do with a baffling outbreak of leukemia.

Since 1997, 17 children with ties to Fallon have been diagnosed with childhood acute lymphocytic leukemia, or ALL, and three of those children have died.

Dr. Rebecca Calderon of the EPA said arsenic, a known carcinogen, hit levels of up to 100 parts per billion before Fallon set up a costly arsenic-removal system in 2004.

Now the city provides water that has arsenic levels below the standard of 10 parts per billion, she added.

The EPA researchers took blood and urine samples from participants and asked questions regarding diet, water consumption, medical history and exposure to substances such as diesel, pesticides and solvents.

The results will be valuable "even though we don't have any earth-shattering news to tell you about how bad arsenic is for you," Calderon said.

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About 20 percent of those surveyed had suffered from various types of cancer, but Calderon said that rate was "about what you'd expect" given an age spread of 45 to 85 among the study participants. She also said the cancers mentioned by the participants didn't have any known links to arsenic.

The study also showed that people who installed devices in their homes to remove arsenic from their water had measurements only slightly different than tap water measurements. But arsenic levels dropped for people who drank bottled water.

"Well, they told us what some people have been saying for a long time," said Ernie Williams, 71, one of the surveyed residents, as he left the town hall meeting. "The (leukemia) problem is not because of the arsenic."

"Not too much new has been discovered," added Chuck Terry, 55, who also was in the study group. But Terry added that if the study didn't bring anything new to light at least "it puts something to rest."

Arsenic and heavy metals such as tungsten have been mentioned as possible causes of Fallon's ALL cluster in the past. University of Arizona scientists Paul Sheppard and Mark Witten have said their tests show that Fallon has up to 13 times more tungsten in its dust than other Nevada cities.

Tests also have found elevated levels of tungsten in tree rings in Fallon and three other towns with leukemia clusters, they said.

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But other studies turned up no link to the tungsten levels or to high levels of arsenic in Fallon's water supply, a pipeline carrying jet fuel to the Fallon Naval Air Station, local pesticide spraying or an underground nuclear test conducted about 40 years ago.

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