

Agricultural Information During a Radiological Emergency



Introduction

Whether you operate a commercial dairy, raise livestock, grow crops, process or transport food, you're an important part of Washington agriculture. As a member of the agricultural community, this flyer answers questions you might have in the event of a radiological emergency near you.

What is a radiological emergency?

A radiological emergency is an event involving the actual or potential release of radioactive material into the environment. Depending on the situation, public officials may recommend protective actions to help protect people, animals, agriculture, and the food supply.

Radiological emergencies involving nuclear facilities often develop over several hours to several days, providing time for protective actions to be implemented before a release occurs. Radioactive material may be carried by the wind as fine particles (similar to a fine dust) that can settle on crops, pasture, feed, water, and other outdoor surfaces.

Radioactive material can affect people and agriculture through:

- Radioactive particles settling on skin, clothing, animals, crops, feed, equipment, or other surfaces
- Breathing airborne radioactive particles
- Eating or drinking contaminated food or water

In Washington state, the Department of Health is the state's radiation protection authority. During a radiological emergency, the Department of Health determines whether radioactive contamination is present in air, soil, water, crops, dairy, and other agricultural products. A collaborative team of local and state agencies will establish protective measures to help prevent contaminated food and agricultural products from reaching consumers. Based on these recommendations, temporary restrictions may be put in place to prevent potentially contaminated products from entering the marketplace until they are determined to be safe.

You may be asked to stop harvesting, processing, transporting, or distributing agricultural products from affected areas until officials determine they are safe. Do not destroy food, milk, feed, and other agricultural products if radiological contamination is suspected. This can cause unnecessary economic loss and environmental hazards. Wait for official guidance.

Reliable sources of information during an emergency

During a radiological emergency, several methods will be used to warn the public. Local emergency response officials will provide instructions and emergency-related information over designated radio and television stations. People living or working within 10 miles of a nuclear facility will also be notified by warning sirens, emergency alert messages over select radio stations (following siren activation), direct telephone notification or Tone Alert provided for limited use in schools and selected residences with specific notification needs.

For each of the counties within 50 miles of the Columbia Generating Station and the Hanford Site, residents should listen to the primary **Emergency Alert Systems (EAS)** radio station for their area and follow county and state government media sources. Energy Northwest will also provide updates on their website: www.energy-northwest.com.

Protective actions

In the event of a radiological emergency that involves the release of radioactivity into the environment, you will be advised of actions to prevent the contamination of agricultural products. This information will include the latest status on the emergency and actions that are being taken to protect you, your family, and your farm. The local agricultural extension agent, county emergency management office, and local health jurisdiction will also be resources for emergency information and protective actions.

Protecting Yourself and Your Farm

In a radiological emergency, radioactive particles carried by the wind may settle on plants, soil, and garden produce. Follow food safety guidance provided by state and local health officials. Some crops may be quickly harvested and covered to protect them before possible contamination. To reduce your risk, consider the following:

- Ripe fruits and vegetables may be lost if harvesting poses risk of personal contamination.
- Root vegetables may be protected from surface contamination but should not be harvested until cleared by state radiation health officials.
- Bee hives should be closed and moved to sheltered areas such as barns, garages, or in dense vegetation.

Caring for livestock and other farm animals

Livestock and other farm animals will not normally be evacuated during a radiological emergency, so sheltering is the most effective way to limit contamination. Protecting your animals can be done in several ways:

- Provide covered feed and water from protected or enclosed sources
- Prevent animals from drinking from open surface water, including streams, ponds, rivers, or irrigation canals.
- Reduce entry of outside air into animal housing, by filtering or recirculating ventilation systems if possible.

Protecting Food Handling and Processing

At the outset of a radiation-related emergency, agricultural products should not be moved or sold until official laboratory results indicate the facility and products are free from radiation contamination and suitable for commerce. Reducing risk for food processing facilities can be done in several ways:

- Close windows, doors, and outdoor air intakes if practical.
- Reduce entry of outside air by filtering or recirculating ventilation systems if possible.
- Temporarily suspend the processing and movement of products.

Learn More

Washington State Department of Agriculture serves as a link between Washington's agricultural community and the agencies responding to the emergency by sharing timely information, supporting producers, and helping protect public health and the state's agricultural economy. Visit our website for more detailed guidance on protecting your operation, animals, crops, facilities, and food products. You'll also find additional information about what to expect during a radiological emergency, how state agencies work together, and where to find the latest updates and resources.

