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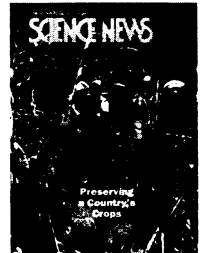
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Cover: Rwandan women harvesting sorghum during happier times — before the recent fighting that killed thousands and devastated farms. With help from a seed protection program, farmers are bringing their fields back to life. (Photo: International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics)



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Science Service, which publishes SCIENCE NEWS, is a nonprofit corporation founded in 1921. It gratefully accepts tax-deductible contributions and bequests to assist its efforts to increase the public understanding of science, with special emphasis on young people. More recently, it has included in its mission increasing scientific literacy among members of underrepresented groups. Through its Youth Programs it administers the International Science and Engineering Fair, the Science Talent Search for the Westinghouse Science Scholarships, and publishes and distributes the *Directory of Student Science Training Programs for Precollege Students*.

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Letters

Fiery emissions debate

"Radioactivity from burning coal" (SN: 10/1/94, p.223) quotes an Oak Ridge National Laboratory nuclear physicist as deploring the fact that coal plants can release radionuclides in quantities not allowed from nuclear facilities.

This "smokescreen" argument has been emanating in one fashion or another from the nuclear establishment for decades. Only by comparing the total releases in the entire cycle of coal versus nuclear plants can one arrive at an accurate comparative estimate of radionuclide release.

CORRECTION

In "One HIV strain defends against another" (SN: 11/26/94, p.360), the chimps that developed "sky-high" concentrations of antibodies were the control animals, not the vaccinated chimps.

Since nuclear energy production starts with the mining of uranium, it would be far more accurate to estimate the radioactivity from the mined ore, fissioning and the creation of new radionuclides, and the final decay of the final atom of the final ton of nuclear waste.

Adding these up and assuming dispersal (after all, NRC regulation allows dispersal from nuclear reactors at specified amounts within specified time limits), one arrives at a figure that dwarfs the coal-generated radionuclides.

So when physicist Gabbard deplores the fact that people are exposed "to increasing quantities of radioactive isotopes through air and water movement and the food chain" from coal burning, but neglects to say that this is precisely what the nuclear fuel cycle does at orders of magnitude greater, one scarcely knows whether to attribute his statement to ignorance or deception.

Lorna Salzman
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EPA analysis of fly ash samples taken from the environment surrounding coal-burning power plants in the early 1970's showed uranium and thorium concentrations 8.5 times higher than those in coal ("Trace Elements in Fuel," Advances in Chemistry Series, 141, American Chemical Society, 1975).

Since EPA has had the data for 20 years and neither it nor the NRC is concerned from a regulatory standpoint, one can only assume that areas downwind of coal-fired plants will continue to be bathed in unregulated radioactive materials. These agencies apparently do not perceive this as a public health and safety issue.

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