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Cover: In the heart of central California, near the town of Parkfield, geoscientists have stationed dozens of instruments to capture a major earthquake when it occurs. The instruments, which transmit their data through antennas like the one shown here, have started to sense increased signs of activity near the San Andreas fault. The recent events are causing researchers to wonder whether the expected quake is near. (Photo: John K. Nakata/Sight & Sound Productions, Palo Alto)



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## Letters

### Reactions to Brookhaven brouhaha

I just read that the Department of Energy is proposing to spend \$25 million to clean up "low concentrations of radioactive tritium" in the soil around Brookhaven National Laboratory ("Science's Role in Shake-Up of DOE Lab," SN: 5/10/97, p. 284). Unlike many fission by-products with half-lives of thousands of years, tritium has a half-life of about 12 years. If the leak is stopped, the "problem" will go away by itself fairly quickly.

Since the leak has been occurring for 10 years and was just now noticed, maybe the "problem" can be ignored and the money spent on something more useful.

Richard Factor  
Kinnelon, N.J.

Brookhaven spokeswoman Mona Rowe says the tritiated water may be moving so slowly that, with dilution and natural decay, it's

already reached equilibrium and won't get any higher at the farthest edge of the plume of contamination, which is still inside the perimeter of the laboratory site. If so, "from a technical perspective, it may be that no action is necessary," she says. "But we're not convinced of that yet." Moreover, she notes, the public, which has a say in cleanup decisions, may reject that option. —J. Raloff

In reading about "a technician [who does] electrical repairs on live circuits—and risk[s] electrocution—rather than shut down an experiment," I see something heroic, though probably not as dangerous as it sounds. DOE Assistant Secretary O'Toole sees something unsafe, which should be forbidden.

Perfect safety is an illusory goal. All of us willingly risk our lives every time we get behind the wheel of a car. In addition, bureaucrats seldom have the expertise to judge what is reasonable and what is not.

My own rule of thumb: If it is less danger-

ous than driving to work, it is not worth worrying about.

Rick Norwood  
Johnson City, Tenn.

Wouldn't a polyethylene sheeting liner for the used-fuel storage pool be less expensive, easier to install, and less likely to crack than a stainless steel one?

Shawn Turner  
Huber Heights, Ohio

Because any liner will have to withstand very high radiation fields, the material of choice is stainless. Under radiation bombardment, Brookhaven officials say, polyethylene would harden and crack. —J. Raloff

### CORRECTION

The two flawed genes responsible for corneal dystrophy ("Corneal dystrophy genes mapped," SN: 6/21/97, p. 389) were reported in the June NATURE GENETICS.