**LeRoy Moore: Burn canceled; what's next?**

***By LeRoy Moore***

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On Jan. 30, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) responded to public opposition by cancelling the "prescribed burn" planned for this spring at the Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge. This sounds like good news. But they call this cancellation only a postponement, since they have from the state a five-year permit. This tells me we may well expect future burn proposals.

FWS asserts that they want more public dialogue on this issue. But the day before they canceled the burn their commitment to dialogue abruptly collapsed. Refuge Project Leader David Lucas failed to show up for a scheduled meeting with a group of us to review alternatives to the burn. His reason for cancelling: that media and an attorney might be present. FWS has yet to hold its first public meeting about the burn. Many people learned of the plan from a bottom-up petition opposing the burn that gathered 2,780 signatures. I have been closely following Rocky Flats for 36 years. I have always welcomed dialogue with responsible parties at the site. In the interest of a dialogue on the burn, I invite FWS personnel to consider the following.

The mass-production of plutonium cores for nuclear warheads that started at Rocky Flats in 1952 began a long tradition of risk from plutonium to people throughout the area. The risks did not end with the end of production 37 years later. Next came 15 years of the Department of Energy's "risk-based cleanup" — a cleanup that left countless minute particles of highly toxic radioactive plutonium in the environment, including at the Rocky Flats Wildlife Refuge. And now Fish & Wildlife proposes to control invasive vegetation there with burns.

Such burns will perpetuate risk at Rocky Flats for three reasons:

1. Tiny particles of plutonium remain in the Refuge environment. Sampling done there during the cleanup detected plutonium on the soil surface, but it did not look at what had percolated down to lower levels. No one knows to this day how much plutonium is in the Refuge soil or exactly where it is.

2. Grass and other plants bring plutonium up from deeper levels, depositing some in surface soil, retaining some in the structure of the plants. A burn will release plutonium particles into the air. Wind will distribute them. People will inhale them.

3. Exposure to plutonium can harm or kill once it is inhaled or taken into the body through an open wound. Unlike other forms of radiation, plutonium's alpha radiation does not leave the body but lodges there and constantly bombards surrounding cells with radiation, typically for the rest of one's life. The result may be cancer, a compromised immune system, or genetic harm to future generations.

Now is the time to end the tradition of risk at Rocky Flats by implementing the precautionary principle — Do no harm. We have to choose: Either we go the way of the burn, or we do no harm.

We should not assume that all is well because the burn proposed for this spring has been canceled. All is not well. Three realities must be faced: First, the Rocky Flats Wildlife Refuge is contaminated with plutonium that can be harmful if released. Second, invasive vegetation must be eliminated because it can overtake native plants such as the prairie tall grass. Third, wildfires from natural or human causes (such as lightning or cigarettes) will happen at the site and will release plutonium unless preventive measures are implemented.

These realities are both immediate and long-term. They must be addressed. Addressing them will move us away from the carelessness of unnecessary risk towards a culture of carefulness and caution. Future generations will honor us for this move. If we fail to act, it is likely they will curse us.

A dangerously contaminated site should have no burns. Invasive vegetation can be targeted with beetles that destroy the ability of the plants to reproduce. Routine mowing or grazing with goats can minimize wildfires from human or natural causes and also reduce burnable debris.

Assuming for the moment that we are serious about dialogue, I offer to lobby in Washington for funding to curtail this risk rather than to perpetuate it.

*LeRoy Moore, Ph.D., is a consultant with the Rocky Mountain Peace and Justice Center. For more information on weed control methods, including using insects, see* [*http://www.wmsym.org/archives/2013/papers/13086.pdf*](http://www.wmsym.org/archives/2013/papers/13086.pdf)