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RADIATION SPILL SITE—Radioactive material lay on the ground outside this state Agriculture Department building for 13 years until it was cleaned up in 1980. —Star-Bulletin Photo by Dennis Oda.

Radioactive Leak on Oahu Disclosed

By Rod Thompson
Star-Bulletin Writer

HILO — Radioactive material lay on the ground outside a state-run irradiation facility in Honolulu for 13 years until it was cleaned up in 1980, according to the East Hawaii Coalition to Stop Food Irradiation.

Although the public never was notified of the leak, no injuries resulted, according to a state Department of Agriculture official.

The contamination outside the building followed spillage of radioactive cobalt-60 inside the Hawaii Development Irradiator building at Fort Armstrong in 1967, Coalition spokeswoman Kathy Dorn said.

The coalition planned to disclose the incident at a press conference on the Big Island today.

Dorn cited the spill as an example of the danger an irradiator can pose to a community. A commercial irradiator is being considered for construction on the Big Island.

THE HAWAII Development Irradiator was operated by the state Department of Agriculture with federal money from 1967

to 1971, according to state documents obtained by Dorn. Dismantling of the facility was delayed until 1980, the documents show.

The facility irradiated papayas for studies of how well they held up in shipment and how wholesome they were, said Department of Agriculture administrator Masao Hanaoka.

Hanaoka confirmed that nine curies of cobalt-60 spilled inside the facility. He became safety officer for the facility after the spill was cleaned up, he said. Nine curies of cobalt-60 could give the equivalent of 180 chest X-rays per hour, said Brian Sprinsock of Food Irradiation Response in Santa Cruz, California.

Sprinsock estimated the material on the ground outside the facility could give the equivalent of two chest X-rays per hour when it was cleaned up in 1980, and eight chest X-rays per hour in 1967, before its strength declined.

No injuries are known to have resulted from the spill, Hanaoka said.

THE SPILL was due to defects in the manufacture of steel capsules which contained the cobalt, Hanaoka said. Most of

the spilled cobalt was confined to a pool of water used to shield workers from radioactivity, he said.

Some of that water washed onto the ground when a lead cask containing the damaged capsules was removed in 1967, Hanaoka said.

The soil contamination was discovered when consultant Ralph M. Baltzo decontaminated the entire facility in 1980, Baltzo said in a report to the state Department of Agriculture.

Although the radiation spillage was never publicized, Hanaoka said, there was no cover-up. No laws were violated, and state and federal officials "didn't think it was that much of a hazard to the public," he said.

Irradiation opponent Dorn disagreed about the danger. A similar spill at a proposed Big Island food irradiator could be worse if water soluble cesium-137 is used there instead of cobalt-60, Dorn said.

A cesium-137 leak "would be immediately washed into the groundwater," Dorn said. "It would inevitably lead to higher rates of cancer, birth defects, and damage to peoples' immune systems, making them more susceptible to infection," she said.