

Berkeley Votes To Ban 'Exit' Signs

Contain Tritium Radiation



By Alan Wang

Mar. 21 - KGO - The city of Berkeley is on the cutting edge again -- this time over lighted "exit" signs. Why do city leaders think they're dangerous and want them removed? Alan Wong explains why "exit" signs are being shown the door.

A fire disaster can knock out electricity, so tritium gas is used to light up a lot of emergency exit signs. But if they are smashed or burned, they can emit a deadly radiation into your body.

Paul Lavelly, UC radiation safety officer : "I prefer not to take one out, because taking them out, you have the risk of it breaking."

The glowing tubes contain a radioactive isotope called tritium.

Paul Lavelly, UC radiation safety officer: "Tritium is just a radioactive form of hydrogen."

He says if they're broken, they can be deadly.

Paul Lavelly, UC radiation safety officer: "Some of it would, when it comes out, it would begin to react in the air and become tritiated water."

As a vapor, tritium can be inhaled and cause genetic damage leading to cancer. But experts have debated the actual danger.

Nabil al-Hadithy, Berkeley Haz-Mat manager: "I believe that there's a very small chance of a health hazard potential."

The City of Berkeley is more concerned with liability.

Nabil al-Hadithy, Berkeley Haz-Mat manager: "If one of these breaks, it could be hundreds of thousands of dollars in payment."

And that is up to \$200,000-per-clean-up.

At the recommendation of its environmental committee, Berkeley voted to ban all tritium exit signs in city-owned or leased buildings. But the signs are everywhere -- including Berkeley High School's theater, where faculty members say some students have smashed them.

You can even buy glowing tritium key chains, which can easily be broken.

Although there are thousands of signs in public and private buildings in the city, the ban will only replace five city exit signs. While actual radiation damage has rarely been documented, Berkeley says it wants to be on the cutting edge of environmental health.

The tritium signs were banned unanimously by city hall in Berkeley Tuesday night. It will cost about \$5,000 to replace them, but the potential cost to clean up is about \$200,000.