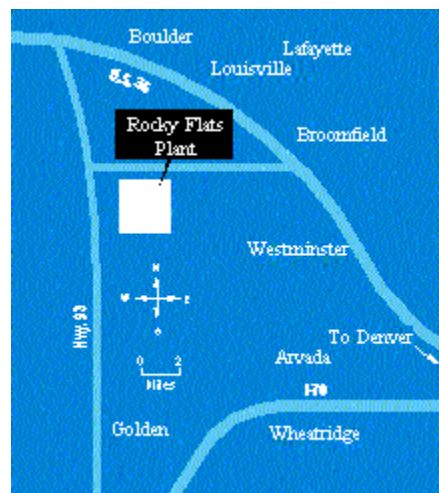


What is the history of Rocky Flats?



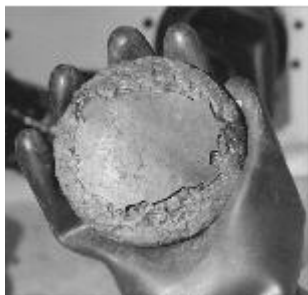
Shown is a 1998 aerial shot of the Rocky Flats Plant



The Rocky Flats Plant is located 16 miles northwest of downtown Denver in close proximity to Golden, Boulder, Arvada, Westminster and Broomfield. The Rocky Flats site and buffer area around it occupy approximately 11 square miles, and are surrounded by ranchland and encroaching suburbs.

For almost 40 years, nuclear weapons parts were produced at Rocky Flats. The industrial facility used radioactive materials and more than 8,000 chemicals. Rocky Flats stopped weapons production in 1989, and cleanup of contamination at the site began in 1992.

Workplace accidents, spills, fires, emissions, leaking storage containers and day-to-day operations allowed plutonium and chemicals to be released from the plant site.



The plant produced weapons triggers or "pits" from plutonium buttons, pictured at left.

From 1952 to 1989, Rocky Flats workers used plutonium to build nuclear weapons triggers, called "pits." The pits were shipped to Texas to be incorporated into weapons. Plutonium is a man-made radioactive metal that can cause cancer. The metal can spontaneously combust in air, becoming hot enough to ignite nearby materials. The type of plutonium examined in the studies was weapons grade (mainly plutonium-239, -240), which remains in the environment for thousands of years after release.

The plant also used other materials such as uranium and beryllium to make weapons parts. Other chemicals such as carbon tetrachloride, a cleaning solvent, were used in the manufacturing processes.

Precautions were taken to control particulate toxic substances. For example, air was filtered in buildings before it was released to the environment, to reduce the amounts of airborne contaminants. However, minimal effort was made to keep carbon tetrachloride from being released into the atmosphere.

Workplace accidents, spills, fires, emissions, leaking storage containers and day-to-day operations allowed plutonium and many chemicals to be released from the plant site.

Why were the historical public exposures studies initiated?

Fire Is Reported At Rocky Flats

A fire at the Dow Chemical Co. Rocky Flats plant Sunday released a small amount of radioactive plutonium contamination, a plant spokesman said. He said the fire broke out in a production building. The cause of the blaze was not known.

He explained the plant is a major production facility in the Atomic Energy Commission weapons complex and handles the radioactive plutonium as part of that work.

Rocky Mountain News, May 12, 1969

Early operations at Rocky Flats were cloaked in secrecy to protect national security after World War II. People living nearby were provided little information about the plant or its chemical and radioactive releases.

A 1969 fire at the plant was the first time the public became generally aware of contaminant releases from Rocky Flats. At that time, the fire was considered the most costly industrial accident in United States history. Independent analyses of soil samples collected near the plant after the fire confirmed that radioactive materials had escaped off-site. As a result, public mistrust and protests over how the plant was managed and operated gained momentum.

On June 6, 1989, agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Justice Department and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) raided Rocky Flats to investigate allegations of environmental crimes. That same year, Rocky Flats was placed on the EPA's list of Superfund hazardous waste sites slated for cleanup, and the manufacture of plutonium triggers at the plant ceased.

In response to these events, former Colorado Governor Roy Romer signed an Agreement in Principle in 1989 with the Department of Energy to fund state oversight of various Rocky Flats health and environmental studies. The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment administered the studies.