

# APNewsBreak: State investigating MIT lab radiation complaint

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In this April 3, 2017 file photo, students walk past the "Great Dome" atop Building 10 on the Massachusetts Institute of Technology campus in Cambridge, Mass. The Massachusetts Department of Public Health said in an Oct. 17, 2019, letter provided to The Associated Press, that it has opened an investigation into "radiation safety and compliance" at the university's Bates Research and Engineering Center in Middleton, Mass. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa, File)

Massachusetts public health officials are looking into allegations that

workers at a Massachusetts Institute of Technology laboratory may have been exposed to radioactive materials.

The state Department of Public Health said in a letter earlier this month that it has opened an investigation into "radiation safety and compliance" at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Bates Research and Engineering Center in Middleton.

The Oct. 17 letter from John Priest, director of the department's Radiation Control Program was provided to The Associated Press by former MIT researcher Babak Babakinejad, a critic of the university's Open Agricultural Initiative, which is run out of Bates lab.

"OpenAg," as the project is nicknamed, was halted earlier this month amid investigations by MIT and the state for possible academic and environmental violations.

"I am particularly concerned about possible exposure of employees to the radioactive contaminated equipment that are still stored at the Bates Lab, many years after the shutdown of the accelerator," Babakinejad wrote in his correspondence to the state.

It's not immediately clear what levels of radiation the accelerator produced or what the health risks, if any, may pose.

Priest said in the letter that the agency considers the concerns "very serious matters" and plans to review records, conduct interviews and on-site inspections.

State public health department spokeswoman Ann Scales declined to comment, citing the ongoing investigation.

MIT confirmed state officials visited the site last Tuesday in response to

the allegations and that it's cooperating with the investigation.

Located on 80 acres about 20 miles north of the university's Cambridge campus, the Bates lab was built in the late 1960s with support from the U.S. Department of Energy.

It houses a linear accelerator, which is used to generate beams of electrons for scientific experiments, particularly in the areas of nuclear and particle physics.

MIT took full ownership of the site in 2005 and began the process of decontaminating and decommissioning the accelerator, according to a university report at the time.

"As part of this effort, the EHS Office developed and implemented a screening procedure to separate those materials requiring disposal as radioactive waste from those meeting free-release criteria," the university's Environment, Health and Safety office said in the annual report to MIT's president.

Tony Sharon, the university's deputy executive vice president, maintained MIT never intended to decommission the facility.

"The facility is operational for nuclear research and development projects," he said in a statement. "The linear accelerator remains on site and could potentially be made functional in the future should appropriate funding become available."

University spokespersons didn't respond when asked to elaborate.

Babakinejad said in a phone interview with The Associated Press that he's concerned the facility is not well secured and that staff and visitors could have been exposed to low level radiation from the easily accessible

contaminated materials.

"There's no need to keep this stuff," he said Tuesday. "The university has lots of money. They can easily get rid of this. It's like leaving trash bags around the house."

Last week, MIT halted OpenAg's operations following complaints from Babakinejad and others that its so-called "personal food computers" didn't actually work and that its creators were faking their results.

The mini refrigerator-sized boxes are meant to grow plants using a system of sophisticated LEDs, sensors and other electronics without the need for soil or sun. They've been touted as a modern solution to growing food in any [environmental conditions](#).

State environmental officials are also investigating whether OpenAg dumped wastewater containing nitrogen in levels higher than state regulations allow at its Bates lab site. That complaint was also raised by Babakinejad, who was a lead researcher at OpenAg until his appointment expired in September 2018.

OpenAg is an initiative of MIT's once famed Media Lab, which has been tarnished by revelations its leaders attempted to conceal the lab's extensive fundraising ties to convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein.

That scandal led to the resignation of the lab's high-profile director, Joi Ito .

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