

US admits radiation exposure killed nuclear weapons workers

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The US government has acknowledged that radiation and chemical exposure at nuclear weapons facilities caused early deaths and cancers among workers. This new finding comes after years of denial by government officials. In the more than five decades since the government began processing radioactive materials to make bombs, government officials have criticized evidence that pointed to the dangers of radiation, spending millions of dollars to fight lawsuits representing sick workers.

A recent government review of worker health finds that radiation led to above normal rates of a wide range of cancers at 14 nuclear weapons plants. A total of 22 categories of cancers were found at higher levels than in the normal population, including bone and bladder cancer and leukemia.

The draft report was written by officials from the Energy Department and the White House, in consultation with other government agencies. President Bill Clinton ordered the study last July following admissions by the Energy Department that some of the weapons workers who had handled the metallic chemical element beryllium had become ill with beryllium disease, an incurable lung ailment, from breathing beryllium dust. Legislation is currently pending that calls for payments to an estimated 500 to 1,000 former workers who handled the substance, ranging from a total of \$15 million to \$30 million a year.

This latest report goes far beyond government admissions in regards to the beryllium workers. Clinton had requested that the study include the effects of radiation as well as the hazards from uranium, plutonium and other substances. Energy Secretary Bill Richardson commented, "This is the first time that the government is acknowledging that people got cancer

from radiation exposure in the plants.... In the past, the role of government was to take a hike, and I think that was wrong."

The draft report cites a uranium-enriching factory in Tennessee, K-25, which has subsequently been closed. Workers at the facility were exposed to radiation as well as the chemicals uranium, plutonium and fluorine. The union representing K-25 workers, the Energy Workers, says that plant workers suffer from higher than expected rates of leukemia, cancer of the lung and bladder, vision problems, chronic fatigue syndrome and other problems. The government report cites only the increased rate of lung cancer.

The report does not mention a plant in Paducah, Kentucky, which was involved in the same industrial process. Workers there recently learned that they were exposed to both plutonium and uranium.

Government researchers have calculated the expected rates of cancers among former employees at the nuclear facilities. Based on both epidemiological studies of the general population, as well as data concerning workers at weapons factories exposed to lower rates of radiation, researchers have calculated the expected rates of various fatal cancers among workers at the 14 nuclear facilities. All of these 22 categories of cancers are fatal.

Although the report does not explain or address the etiology of these cancers, it is acknowledged that they are caused by radiation and chemical exposure. Precise records of radiation and other exposure are not available at a number of sites.

Cancers were found among nearly 600,000 people who had worked in nuclear production since the beginning of World War II, but the government has not estimated how many of these instances are the results of radiation and chemical exposure. These cancers

include leukemia, Hodgkin's lymphoma, and cancer of the prostate, kidney, salivary gland and lung.

Workers afflicted with these cancers came from the K-25 operation in Oak Ridge, Tennessee; Savannah River in South Carolina; Hanford, Washington; Rocky Flats, Colorado; and the Fernald Feed Materials Center near Cincinnati, Ohio. Cancers were also found among workers at the Lawrence Livermore and Los Alamos nuclear laboratories.

A senior government official familiar with the study commented, "we could be talking about hundreds of cases, in a population of hundreds of thousands." Although the government has not directly addressed the issue of compensation, payments to affected workers could total tens of millions of dollars.



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