



Wanted: Justice for Nuclear Testing Victims



Nearly 2,000 nuclear weapons tests have been conducted worldwide. The U.S. alone conducted 217 aboveground tests. About half of them were exploded at the Department of Energy’s Nevada Test Site from the early 1950s to the early 1960s. Atmospheric fallout from the aboveground tests, and the thirty underground tests known to have “vented” significant radiation contained harmful radionuclides and was carried thousands of miles from the Test Site. The government assured the public that testing was a safe and necessary part of protecting America.

In 1983 Congress directed the National Cancer Institute (NCI) to study the health impacts of U.S. nuclear testing fallout, in particular radioactive iodine, I-131. After more than a decade and much pressure from public interest groups and Congress, the study was released in 1997.

The study results were shocking: Millions of people in the U.S. born between the mid-1940s and early 1960s received significant doses of I-131 from Nevada Test Site fallout. Hot spots occurred thousands of miles from the test site—as far as New York, Vermont, Montana, the Dakotas, Missouri and Iowa.

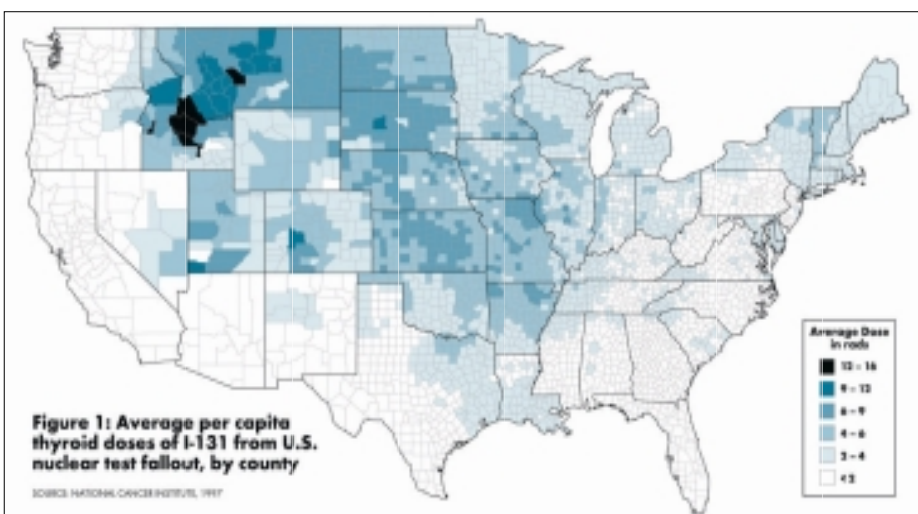
Recommendations

- Support the Crapo-Craig-Burns bill to include additional states under the *Radiation Exposure Compensation Act*.
- Support the *Safety for Americans from Nuclear Weapons Testing Act*.
- Preserve the moratorium on nuclear weapons testing and end all plans to resume testing.

The study indicated that some children in high fallout areas who drank goat’s milk in the 1950s were as severely exposed as the worst-exposed children after the 1986 Chernobyl accident.

The NCI report estimated that between 11,300 and 212,000 excess thyroid cancers would be expected to occur in the U.S. population due to I-131 exposure from Nevada Test Site fallout. This year, one month after the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability

filed a Freedom of Information Act request for its release, NCI and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) released a follow-up report on health effects of *global* fallout on the U.S population that was mandated by Congress in 1998. The report found that including additional fallout radionuclides and additional test sites would likely increase the NCI cancer risk estimates by about 15 percent.



Note: This map represents estimates of average thyroid doses averaged over the entire country. It does not provide estimates of highest or lowest thyroid doses.



The 1970 Baneberry underground nuclear test, conducted at the Nevada Test Site. Buried 900 feet beneath the surface, the explosion unexpectedly vented radioactive dust into the atmosphere.

The Congressional Response

The Radiation Exposure Compensation Act

As a result of pressure from downwinders, public interest groups and lawsuits, the Senate, under the leadership of Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT), passed the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act of 1990 (RECA).

The law provides modest compensation to individuals exposed to radiation who meet certain criteria. The program provides lump-sum payments for: uranium miners, millers, and ore transporters; certain people present at nuclear tests; and residents from a handful of counties in Utah, Nevada and Arizona who lived in the area during the time of atmospheric testing and contracted one of 19 specified cancers. This legislation was historic: it was the first time the government publicly acknowledged that downwinders and uranium workers had been harmed and deserved a form of redress.

In the decade after its passage, it became evident that RECA, though well intentioned, did not serve as many people as it should. In an effort to remedy this problem, Sen. Hatch introduced a bill to update RECA. His successful 2000 amendment expanded the uranium worker category and made it more claimant-friendly. It also added seven additional counties to the downwinder claimant category.

While RECA and its 2000 amendments have brought a modicum of justice to people made sick by nuclear testing, the act needs further improvement. As currently structured, the program compensates people in certain high fallout areas (e.g., some Utah counties) while denying those in other, higher fallout areas (e.g., Idaho, the Dakotas, Montana, etc.).

In December 2005, Idaho Senators Mike Crapo (R-ID) and Larry Craig (R-ID) and Montana Senator Conrad Burns (R-MT) introduced legislation that would include both of their states under RECA.

In a statement, Sen. Crapo said, "I am continuing my efforts to work with Senators from a number of states to build momentum that will lead to compensation for victims in Idaho and many other states."

The Safety for Americans from Nuclear Weapons Testing Act

This year Congressman Jim Matheson (D-UT) introduced a bill that would make it more difficult to resume nuclear weapons testing. The legislation calls for a full assessment of the implications of future testing and additional health research efforts related to past radiation exposures. It also forces Congress to have a floor debate before authorizing any renewed testing.

Conclusion

In light of the awful toll nuclear weapons testing has imposed on the health of the very people those weapons were supposed to protect, it is deeply disappointing that the Bush Administration and some members of Congress are promoting programs that could lead to new nuclear weapons designs and production facilities. These programs increase the likelihood that the U.S. will resume nuclear testing. Rather than pursuing such dangerous, unnecessary and expensive programs, the federal government should instead make good on its obligation to help people sickened by U.S. nuclear weapons testing and end nuclear weapons development and testing for good.

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