



Uranium Workers Subjected to Dangers Should Be Compensated and Treated Now

PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release, 25 June 2001

Uranium Workers Subjected to Dangers from Plutonium and Other Contaminants in U.S. Nuclear Bomb Program Should Be Compensated and Treated Now

Individual Radiation Doses Will Be Nearly Impossible to Calculate Accurately, Leading to Costly and Unfair Process, Independent Institute Says

Takoma Park, Maryland: Many thousands of workers were unknowingly exposed to [plutonium](#), neptunium, and other radioactive materials when they thought they were processing uranium, which is far less radioactive. The contaminants in the uranium were the result of its recovery from highly radioactive waste or other processing streams in the course of producing [plutonium](#) for the U.S. nuclear weapons program. The new problems, present at dozens of plants, were revealed in a [June, 2001 story in USA Today](#). Most of the plants where the new problems were revealed were privately owned and did contract work for the government's nuclear bomb program.

“Many of these workers were already exposed to very dangerous levels of uranium, far above then-prevailing standards,” said Dr. Arjun Makhijani, president of the Institute for Energy and Environmental Research (IEER), in Takoma Park, Maryland, a non-profit organization which has published many studies on the health and environmental effects of nuclear weapons production. IEER produced a special study last year for USA Today on three privately-owned plants that showed appalling conditions working relating to uranium and thorium contamination in the 1940s and 1950s. “The plutonium contamination makes an already difficult and complex problem much worse,” said Dr. Makhijani. IEER's study for USA Today is on the Internet at <http://www.usatoday.com/news/poison/docdex.htm>.

In October 2000, the U.S. government became the first nuclear weapons state to take the historic step of acknowledging that 600,000 workers were put in harm's way and may contract illnesses as a result of their radiation exposure in the nuclear weapons program. But the compensation legislation passed by Congress last year requires workers at all but four nuclear weapons related locations to prove their radiation doses before can be compensated.

“These new revelations show that many workers face a daunting and essentially impossible task,” said Dr. Makhijani. “Some of the plutonium exposures could well have been low, but others may have been substantial. There are essentially no data on plutonium and neptunium exposure of individual workers at uranium plants. The government and its contractors just weren't looking, even though the government was aware that recycled uranium was tainted and that certain forms, like furnace ash, contained levels of plutonium well above allowed contaminant limits. It is unfair and unjust to impose the burden of proof on



workers now when the government did not do its job well then.”

IEER’s studies based on government records show that worker dose records at uranium and many other plants are incomplete and, in many cases, shockingly deficient. Some are tainted by data fabrication and scientifically indefensible dose estimation procedures. “Until 1989, the government did not calculate radiation doses resulting from inhalation of radioactive materials for any of the workers in the nuclear weapons program. These workers should be given the benefit of the doubt and compensated,” said Dr. Makhijani. “Many are sick now. They don’t have the time to wait for bureaucratic procedures to see if their radiation doses can be reconstructed. The poor state of the records makes it unlikely that even a long, expensive process would result in accurate dose estimates for large numbers of workers.”

“The government should follow up on the courageous and historic step it took by passing compensation legislation and move rapidly to treat and compensate affected workers and their families. Anything less would compound the injustice of their exposures, which were in many cases well above then-prevailing standards,” Dr. Makhijani said.