

'DOWNWINDERS' HONORED:

Utah adopts resolution Day of Remembrance for nuke test victims set

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SALT LAKE CITY -- It's been 50 years since the Army first tested nuclear weapons in Southern Nevada, and the fallout is still lingering.

Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt and his state's Legislature adopted a resolution Friday commemorating the anniversary of the first open-air atomic bomb test and the "downwinders" who paid the price.

Rep. Neal Hendrickson, D-West Valley City, said his parents and his sister died from cancer related to the fallout that drifted east from Nevada and blanketed parts of southern Utah.

"I happened to stand on the Black Ridge of St. George and watch those clouds come up and the dust blow over and fall on the citizens," said Rep. Jack Seitz, R-Vernal.

Saturday marked the 50th anniversary of the first test. They went on for 37 years, with the government insisting all along they posed no threat.

"This is government at its absolute worst and if we don't remember it with a resolution like this we are going to repeat it," said Rep. Stephen Urquhart, R-St. George.

The resolution also notes that miners in Utah, Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico and the Navajo Nation who gathered uranium for the nuclear weapons program later contracted diseases caused by the radiation.

"I think we'll never know how much suffering went unrecognized," said Sen. Chris Buttars, R-West Jordan. His father had a sheep ranch near Payson, and said that after tests the fields were covered with white ash.

The resolution sets Jan. 27 as a Day of Remembrance "to recognize the legacy of the Cold War and express hope for peace, justice, healing, reconciliation, and the fervent desire and commitment to assure that such a legacy will never be repeated."

A group of downwinders gathered at the Capitol on Saturday to commemorate the anniversary.

Last July, President Clinton signed a bill paying up to \$100,000 to people sickened by Cold War-era uranium mining and nuclear tests, expanding on a 1990 law.

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Radiation Victims Honored

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BY LINDA FANTIN

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As far as golden anniversaries go, Saturday was about as solemn as it gets.

At 5:05 a.m. on Jan. 27, 1951, an atomic bomb lighted up the desert sky, the Nevada Test Site became operational and before long, lethal uranium deposits throughout the West were mined to build America's nuclear weapons arsenal.

Fifty years later, Ed Brickey is still losing friends to the fallout, friends like Carol Dewey of Dove Creek, Colo.

Dewey grew up around the uranium mines owned and operated by her late father. As president of the Colorado Plateau Uranium Workers, she lobbied tirelessly so that victims of radiation exposure, like her father, would be compensated by the U.S. government.

She died Thursday, her neck swollen with a rare form of cancer, and unexpectedly became one of the victims she intended to honor at Saturday's anniversary rally in the rotunda of the Utah Capitol.

"That's what we've come to expect when you grow up around a mill," said Brickey as he flipped through old photographs of Uravan, a Utah mining town outside Moab where he was raised. "We never had a choice. That's what's so sad about it."

Duped by the government about the dangers of atomic radiation, Brickey not only followed his father into uranium mining, he also worked at the Nevada Test Site.

On Friday, he joined a small group of uranium miners, Navajos and "downwinders" to commemorate the somber anniversary and to use the occasion to blast Washington, D.C., lawmakers for not doing enough to compensate victims of radiation exposure.

Led by Utah's Sen. Orrin Hatch, Congress passed the 1990 Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA) guaranteeing up to \$100,000 to downwinders and miners -- then didn't fund it for two years. Now the program is broke and the government is handing out IOUs.

In July, President Clinton signed an amendment to the 1990 law extending the compensation to millers and transporters of radioactive uranium ore. Again, the money is slow to follow and the government has yet to release the criteria so victims can apply for the funds.

"It didn't take near this long to compensate the Japanese for their suffering during World War II," said Mary Brickey.

Life is especially grim for the Navajos, who not only worked in the mines but lived downwind of the Nevada nuclear blasts. Goats and sheep ate grass contaminated by clouds of radioactive dust tainting the milk and meat that feed the clans. Even the rocks that were used to construct their houses are hot.

Elsie Mae Begay's hogan -- a traditional Navajo dwelling where Begay and her family had lived for years in Monument Valley -- has a floor made from such stones. Earlier this summer, the Environmental Protection Agency found that radiation levels were 80 times acceptable levels.

On Nov. 14, the EPA wrote to Begay promising to remove the hogan and replace it with a wooden structure by December.

"We're still waiting," Begay said Saturday.

Navajos often have a tougher time qualifying for federal aid because medical records, birth certificates and other official documents the government demands do not exist for many tribe members stricken with radiation-related diseases.

Others, like Dave Timothy, are excluded from the narrowly-written legislation.

Timothy lived in northern Utah in 1962 when winds plastered the area with radioactive fallout from above ground tests conducted at the Nevada site. Timothy, whose neck bares the scar from thyroid surgery, said he remembers the milk was so contaminated it had to be dumped down the sink.

But RECA only allows for downwinders in southern Utah to apply for compensation.

He called the legislation "a scam," saying it was designed to limit the government's risk, not to adequately compensate victims.

J. Truman agrees. The director of Downwinders says by restricting the categories of victims, Congress has prevented victims from "getting enough numbers to kick some butt in Washington."

He and others hope that will change.

"A lot of work must be done before justice is done," he said.

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