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Saturday, February 5, 2000 | [Print this story](#)**Government Finally Hears a Nuclear Town's Horrors**

By KIM MURPHY, Times Staff Writer

RICHLAND, Wash.--No one ever thought they'd see it happen. Not in this town, home of the Atomic Foods supermarket, the Bombers football team (with the tiny mushroom cloud over the school sign) and streets with names like Proton Court.

But then no one in this company town ever thought the company would admit it had hurt them. The company, in this case, is the U.S. Department of Energy, operator of the Hanford plutonium-making complex in central Washington. Last week, Energy Secretary Bill Richardson ended decades of official denials by conceding that workers in 14 nuclear weapon plants had been exposed to harmful levels of radioactive and chemical contamination.

For years, people who talked about radioactive illnesses and safety hazards at Hanford--the backbone employer in Richland for more than 50 years--were dismissed as troublemakers or, worse yet, unpatriotic.

So when the government invited people to come to the federal building here Thursday night to talk about how Hanford had made them sick, the result was astounding: a room full--no, more than a room full, they spilled out into the atrium and an adjoining conference room--of men and women who had spent their lives measuring and transporting and mixing some of the deadliest known radionuclides.

These were not young nuclear activists, or even industry whistle-blowers. They were men in their 50s, 60s and 70s, wearing work shirts and billed caps. They were women who'd worked as secretaries and chemical process technicians. Or widows of onetime employees who'd buried husbands long before they thought they ought to have.

The government's reversal--a move that could cost tens of millions of dollars in compensation costs--was based on a preliminary report that examined studies and medical data for an estimated 600,000 workers at federal nuclear sites. It concluded that workers suffered higher-than-normal rates of a wide range of cancers and that those illnesses clearly can be associated with exposure in the workplace.

The hearing at Hanford was the sixth held so far as DOE officials have embarked on the emotional venture of eliciting

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stories about the price employees have paid for helping develop the nation's formidable nuclear arsenal.

"This is just extraordinary. These are people who needed to talk. But it took a government agency they trusted saying: 'Yes, you've been injured, and yes, we're going to do something about it,' " said Trisha Pritikin, an activist who has worked to gain compensation for residents who lived downwind of the nuclear site.

"My uncle worked at the T-plant. He died of cancer. My foreman died of cancer. My mother, who worked at Hanford, died at the age of 42 of cancer. My father died of emphysema, which I believe was because of his exposure to radiation. I've worked in areas where the people--I can't find a one of them alive today--they're all dead of cancer," said Charles Moore, who worked at Hanford until his lungs, covered with fibrous white plaque, left him unable to work without running out of breath. Then he was fired for "lack of production."

"In my estimation," Moore said, "the government has spent millions and millions of dollars on studies, and they haven't helped one soul."

The DOE began holding public meetings in places like Rocky Flats, Colo.; Oak Ridge, Tenn.; and Paducah, Ky., even before release of the draft report.

They followed President Clinton's July announcement that he would seek legislation to cover medical costs and lost wages for contract government employees exposed to beryllium, a metal used in making nuclear weapons that is thought to have led to lung disease in hundreds of workers.

The hearings are intended to gather evidence about whether workers who have radiation-induced cancer or lung disease caused by asbestos or silica dust should be compensated as well. The draft report indicates there is scientific data to conclude they have been harmed by the exposure.

"Workers are getting up and--many times for the first time--speaking publicly about their illnesses and their belief that it's work-related," said David Michaels, the assistant Energy secretary for environment, safety and health who is conducting the hearings. "We had a meeting in an Iowa plant that was closed 25 years ago, where workers said they still don't tell their physicians what they did and what they worked with because they'd been asked to keep it secret."

Federal officials have not estimated how much it could cost to compensate injured workers. Michaels said he expects the number of cases "that are clearly work-related and compensable" will number "in the hundreds, rather than tens of thousands."

More than 530 people showed up for Thursday's hearing at Hanford, which stretched to five hours as a steady stream of people filed up to the microphone--many of them coughing constantly, one man, his larynx removed, speaking with the aid of a voice amplifying device.

They told story after story of prostate surgeries, cancerous thyroid removals, lung growths, skin cancers, leukemias; tales of gloves that got punctured, setting off plutonium-alert bells all

over a laboratory; of running to escape from radioactive plumes, then losing all the feeling in their fingers; of finding themselves next to a fine mist leaking from a barrel, then vomiting and passing out.

They are the everyday work stories that go along with handling substances so poisonous that a drop retains the capacity to kill for thousands of years.

On Dec. 29, 1952, C.F. Foster got pricked with a plutonium-contaminated wire brush. When he was examined, the radiation measured "a million count"--all over his sleeve, all over several layers of gloves.

"They scrubbed me up, and they basically told me it'll be 10 years before anything turns up," Foster said. "They said it'll be either leukemia or cancer of the bone. And I said, 'Well, that's something to look forward to.' " He has had three prostate operations for cancer.

Virginia Knirck, a longtime employee whose family has had five Hanford workers over three generations, watched her father die of cancer at age 55. Years ago, her first husband, a Hanford lab employee, fell to the floor and died two days before Christmas. She was three months' pregnant at the time and has since been diagnosed with lymphoma, colon cancer and renal cell cancer. "My son, at the age of 10, had to have his parotid gland removed, and now he has leukemia. My sister has lymphoma, and her husband has had two cancers. I'm living in Richland. Is this causing my son and my sister and my father and myself to get sick?"

Thad Coleman worked most of his life at Hanford. He's had to have surgery on his throat, he's been diagnosed with cancer of the pancreas, his lungs are riddled with asbestosis. "I don't want to be the richest man in a graveyard, I'll have to say that. I'm not out to sue. But they say the only thing they can do with me is a lung transplant. Any of you guys out there got a lung? Well, I need one."

Eustolio Salinas Jr. started work at Hanford in the late '80s in the old PUREX plutonium processing plant, then shifted to the tank farm, where some of Hanford's deadliest wastes lie buried in shallow storage vessels. A few years ago, at age 36, he was diagnosed with leukemia and underwent debilitating chemotherapy last summer.

A big, burly man, Salinas looked square at Michaels when he spoke.

"I hear now the government is admitting fault, that they want to help out people. But I don't know where this disease is taking me. I may need a bone marrow transplant," he said, starting to fight back tears. "I did my work, and I did it proud. But I'd like to be around here when I retire, to be with my boys, and hopefully some grandchildren. A lot of people didn't make it."

Workers told of spending years trying to get compensation payments from the state, of having to hire attorneys to get disability pay, of going to clinics that forced them to sign away rights to a portion of any future disability payments before they could be treated.

Workers with enough seniority to transfer out of high radiation zones to safer jobs found themselves cut off from annual government physicals because they were no longer working in dangerous areas--even though their worst medical problems only now are surfacing.

"The people in this area have been forced into poverty because they've had to retire in their 30s, 40s and 50s, too young to get a retirement, too young to get Social Security. They fall through the cracks, and they die," complained Kay Sutherland, who has lost four of her five family members to disease--in addition to suffering four miscarriages herself. She has an enlarged liver and multiple tumors.

"I am a Holocaust survivor for the American Cold War," she declared.

Most were less dramatic. They didn't make declarations; they walked quietly onto the stage, thanked Michaels for his time, thanked the government for listening, thanked Hanford managers for giving them good-paying jobs for so many years.

"We don't want a big claim," said Marty Arntzen, who has spent most of his life in the nuclear industry. "We don't want a lot of money. We want enough to get by and live a dignified life--for what's left of it."

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