

Too many 'downwinders' are still suffering

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Any objective study of American history brings us to the realization that there are many Americans who quietly made, and continue to make, great sacrifices for our national security. Many of these women and men willingly give of themselves to ensure that our country remains free.

Tragically, under the banner of national security the United States government exposed Americans to radioactive uranium ore and radioactive dust — subjecting them to lung cancer and other respiratory illnesses.

On July 16, we marked the 76th anniversary of the detonation of the first nuclear weapon — code-named Trinity — in the desert of New Mexico's Tularosa Basin. Three weeks after the Trinity detonation, the United States exploded the Little Boy bomb over Hiroshima and, three days later, the Fat Man bomb over Nagasaki. Six days later, Japan surrendered. In the aftermath of World War II, a nuclear arms race began that reached its zenith with over 60,000 nuclear weapons worldwide in 1986.

Many lives were lost or severely altered by the nuclear weapons program. Thankfully, the world stockpile of nuclear weapons has steadily declined since 1986 and will, hopefully, continue to do so in the future. Yet, the effects of detonating over 1,100 nuclear weapons since the Trinity test in 1945 continue to mar the lives of Americans to this day.

Through atmospheric weapons tests, as well as mining, transporting and milling of uranium ore, many Americans have been slowly killed by radiation exposure. Thousands of Utahns were infected by radiation exposure simply by living "downwind" of the federal government's nuclear weapons testing sites. Additional Utahn miners were affected as they worked the uranium necessary for these weapons. These "downwinders" and miners and their families' friends, and communities often suffered excruciating illness, loss and devastation.

In response to this malfeasance, Congress rightly enacted (and later amended in 2000) the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA) in 1990. This legislation was a good first step in making recompense to those who mined and hauled uranium ore and those

who processed the ore at a mill. The RECA legislation also addresses those exposed to radiation downwind from nuclear test sites.

It has been more than 20 years since any meaningful reform to RECA has been made for those whose lives have been taken or irreversibly altered by our foray into the arms race. Several classifications of workers such as core drillers and ground workers have been denied justice by being excluded completely from the process.

Some diseases that should have been compensable have been excluded. Numerous geographical locations exposed to downwind radiation have been left out. Uranium miners continued to mine after the United States stopped buying uranium for its nuclear weapons programs in 1971. These so-called post-1971 workers were excluded from accessing benefits since the original RECA legislation had an arbitrary cutoff date of Dec. 31, 1971 — even though the federal government continued to regulate uranium mines long after 1971. To make matters worse, RECA is scheduled to sunset in July 2022 — potentially leaving all classifications of exposure victims without redress.

We are honored to represent some of these “downwinders” and their family members and want them to know their suffering — and the sacrifices they made for our nation — are not forgotten.

That is why we are pleased to be the lead Republican members of the House of Representatives on the “RECA Amendments Act of 2021,” legislation that will reauthorize RECA for those still suffering the consequences of nuclear testing.

The tragic consequences of the nuclear arms race cannot be swept under the rug of history. We urge our colleagues in Congress to support the “RECA Amendments Act of 2021.” Our country must act now to address the injustices of those who have been forgotten by their own government.