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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

COMMITTEES:

FINANCE
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BUDGET

March 24, 2021

The Honorable Steve Cohen
Chair
House Judiciary Committee
Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties
2138 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mike Johnson
Ranking Member
House Judiciary Committee
Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties
2138 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Cohen and Ranking Member Johnson,

Thank you for holding this important hearing to afford RECA reform the attention that it, and all of those affected, so deserve.

It is beyond time for the federal government to right a past wrong that caused harm countless innocent Americans.

Between 1951 and 1962, the federal government conducted one-hundred atmospheric atomic weapons tests at the Nevada Test Site, roughly sixty-five miles north of Las Vegas.

The Atomic Energy Commission selected the rural Nevada location due to the low population density and "virtually uninhabitable" land downwind from the site. The prevailing winds blew eastward, away from the more densely populated Los Angeles and Las Vegas metropolitan areas.

At various times between 1946 and 1962 the United States conducted sixty-seven nuclear weapons tests in the Marshall Islands, east of Guam.

With the exception of the original World War II Trinity Test in New Mexico, the one-hundred above-ground tests at the Nevada Test Site were the only atmospheric atomic weapons tests conducted in the continental United States.

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These tests, in which atomic weapons detonated at or above ground level, released deadly radioactive material into the atmosphere.

Exposure to radioactive contamination can manifest itself as various forms of cancer, particularly leukemia and thyroid cancer.

In Idaho, much of the fallout stems from a single above-ground test of a 14-kiloton bomb on June 5, 1952. It was the eighth test of a program known as Operation Tumbler-Snapper, and its fallout landed on Idaho in a severe rainstorm.

Researchers have determined that certain elements of the resulting fallout, such as the radioactive isotope Iodine-131 and Strontium-90, settled in states across the West.

Iodine-131, which concentrates in the thyroid gland, has a half-life of about eight days, which is long enough for amounts to be deposited onto pasture and transferred to people through milk and other dairy products.

Sheri Garmon, a friend of mine who grew up in Emmett, Idaho, was less than six months old when a 14-kiloton plutonium bomb code-named “Tumbler-Snapper” detonated at 3:55am. In describing the fallout, she said, “It looked like frost. Nobody ever told us there was any danger.”

Nobody warned her or her father, Don, that the white dust that drifted onto their fields was dangerous radioactive fallout that could make its way into their milk supply.

Like many Emmett residents, Sheri grew up on a dairy farm, drinking fresh milk produced by her family’s cows.

Sheri graduated as Emmett’s high school valedictorian, became a CPA, married and had a daughter.

When she was 30, she was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. Breast cancer followed in 2000. The cancer spread to her bones and liver and she passed away in 2005 at age 53.

Before her death, Sheri used the National Cancer Institute’s dose calculator to learn that she had been exposed to an estimated 75 rads of radiation – the equivalent of 10,000 chest X-rays – from drinking raw milk as a child.

Children of her generation, living in rural western towns like Emmett, where the National Cancer Institute study showed residents had received large doses of radioactive Iodine-131, were – and are – at greater risk for developing thyroid cancer because their family cows ingested contaminated grass.

We have lost other Idahoans to cancer, like Theresa Valberg and Sergeant First Class Paul Cooper. J. Preston Truman, another friend of mine and a key advocate for “downwinders” passed away this year due to cancer.

Sergeant Cooper served three tours of duty in Vietnam and put his life on the line for our country.

But, following orders, he participated in military exercises in which he and more than 2,000 other troops marched through radioactive dust near ground zero of a 1957 test, code-named “Smoky”, minutes after the explosion, in order to test the group’s reactions to nuclear fire.

While battling leukemia in a VA hospital, Sergeant Cooper told a reporter that his cancer was the result of his exposure to radiation from the Smoky test.

Sergeant Cooper died of acute leukemia at the VA Hospital in Boise at the age of forty-four.

Following his death, the Deseret News reported that the Public Health Service had found unexplained clusters of leukemia in the Utah towns of Parowan, Paragonah and Monticello. Those findings had never been published.

Department of Defense and National Institutes of Health data showed an excess of civilian leukemia cases in the counties downwind from the Nevada Test Site.

That was over forty years ago.

In 1990, Congress recognized the need for the federal government to make amends for the harm caused to innocent citizens by nuclear testing, and passed the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act, which provides a one-time payment for individuals suffering from leukemia, thyroid cancer and other radiation-related illnesses connected to the tests.

Administered by the Department of Justice, the RECA program has awarded over \$2.4 billion in benefits to more than 37,000 claimants since its inception.

Unfortunately, RECA only provides coverage for victims living in certain counties in Nevada, Utah and Arizona. Idaho, New Mexico, Montana and other nearby states have been left out, along with Guam in the Pacific.

A report produced by the National Academy of Sciences recognized that among the twenty-five counties with the highest per capita dosage of radiation, twenty reside in Idaho and Montana.

Meagher County in Montana and the Idaho counties of Custer, Gem, Blaine and Lemhi had the highest levels of Iodine-131 exposure in the country.

This information underscores the dire need for Congress to extend RECA beyond its July 2022 sunset date and expand the program’s coverage to include victims in states across the West.

For that reason, I have – in each of the past several Congresses – introduced a bill to correct the geographic mistake and expand RECA coverage to make eligible the scores of deserving Americans currently awaiting compensation. I plan to do so again in this Congress, and will continue to fight for the rights of those unjustly harmed by the federal government.

The science shows that they should not have to wait any longer for their rightful opportunity to seek redress.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Mike Crapo". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mike Crapo
United States Senator