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Toxic exposure kept secret; [FINAL Edition]

Peter Eisler. **USA TODAY**. McLean, Va.: Sep 6, 2000. pg. 01.A

Subjects:	Private sector, Radiation, Health hazards, Series & special reports, Nuclear accidents & safety, Occupational hazards, Environmental impact
Author(s):	Peter Eisler
Document types:	Feature
Column Name:	*COVER STORY*
Section:	*NEWS*
Publication title:	USA TODAY. McLean, Va.: Sep 6, 2000. pg. 01.A
Source type:	Newspaper
ISSN/ISBN:	07347456
ProQuest document ID:	59617831
Text Word Count	1130
Document URL:	http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=59617831&sid=5&Fmt=3&clientId=72171&RQT=309&VName=PQD

Abstract (Document Summary)

Exclusive Report; Poisoned workers & poisoned places; The U.S. government secretly hired hundreds of private companies during the 1940s and '50s to process huge volumes of nuclear weapons material, leaving a legacy of poisoned workers and contaminated communities that lingers to this day.; See related stories: 17A-18A

Most of the contracting sites were in the industrial belt: through New England, New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, around the Great Lakes and down the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys. They were in big cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago and St. Louis. And they were in smaller communities, such as Lockport, N.Y., Carnegie, Pa., and Joliet, Ill. Some did only minor work for the weapons program, but dozens of private facilities handled large quantities of radioactive and toxic material.

PHOTO, Color, Robert Deutsch, USA TODAY; PHOTO, B/W, American Medical Association archives; Caption: "They always assured us there was no danger": Lewis Malcolm was exposed to hazardous uranium and thorium dust on the job at a Lockport, N.Y., plant that did contracting work for the nuclear weapons program. He died of kidney failure in June. His story, 15A. Metal dust: A metal-rolling mill similar to those used at Simonds. The ventilator hood atop the machine removed dust; for years at Simonds, work was done on radioactive materials using unventilated mills.

Full Text (1130 words)

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Exclusive Report; Poisoned workers & poisoned places; The U.S. government secretly hired hundreds of private companies during the 1940s and '50s to process huge volumes of nuclear weapons material, leaving a legacy of poisoned workers and contaminated communities that lingers to this day.; See related stories: 17A-18A

From mom-and-pop machine shops to big-name chemical firms, private manufacturing facilities across the nation were quietly converted to the risky business of handling tons of uranium, thorium, polonium, beryllium and other radioactive and toxic substances. Few of the contractors were prepared for the hazards of their government-sponsored missions.

Thousands of workers were exposed to dangerous levels of radiation, often hundreds of times stronger than the

limits of the time. Dozens of communities were contaminated, their air, ground and water fouled by toxic and radioactive waste.

The risks were kept hidden. In some cases, they have remained so.

A USA TODAY investigation found that the government's reliance on a vast network of private plants, mills and shops to build America's early nuclear arsenal had grave health and environmental consequences. Federal officials knew of severe hazards to the companies' employees and surrounding neighborhoods, but reports detailing the problems were classified and locked away.

The full story of the secret contracting effort has never been told. Many of the companies that were involved have been forgotten, the impact of their operations unexamined for half a century. Yet their history carries profound implications for the thousands of people they employed, as well as for the thousands who lived -- and still live -- near the factories.

At a time when the nation is reassessing the worker ills and ecological damage wrought by large, government-owned nuclear weapons plants, the record of the private companies that did the work before those facilities were built has had little scrutiny.

Most of the contracting sites were in the industrial belt: through New England, New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, around the Great Lakes and down the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys. They were in big cities such as Detroit, Cleveland, Chicago and St. Louis. And they were in smaller communities, such as Lockport, N.Y., Carnegie, Pa., and Joliet, Ill. Some did only minor work for the weapons program, but dozens of private facilities handled large quantities of radioactive and toxic material.

"These places just fell off the map," says Dan Guttman, former director of the President's Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments, set up in 1994 to investigate revelations that government-funded scientists exposed unknowing subjects to dangerous isotopes in secret Cold War studies.

"People were put at considerable risk. It appears (the government) knew full well that (safety) standards were being violated, but there's been no effort to maintain contact with these people (and) look at the effects," says Guttman, a lawyer and weapons program watchdog who returned to private practice after the committee finished its work in 1995. "There's no legitimate reason for this neglect."

USA TODAY reviewed 100,000 pages of government records, many recently declassified and never before subject to public review, to assess the scope and impact of nuclear weapons work done at private facilities in the 1940s and '50s. Reporters visited archives and former contracting sites in 10 states, interviewing scores of former employees, neighbors and government officials.

Key findings:

* Beginning with the development of the first atomic bombs during World War II, the government secretly hired about 300 private companies to process and produce material used in nuclear weapons production. At least a third of them handled hundreds, thousands or even millions of pounds of radioactive and toxic material, often without the equipment or knowledge to protect the health and safety of workers or nearby communities.

The contracting wound down in the mid-1950s as government facilities were built to take over most weapons-building operations - - a move spurred partly by hazards at contracting sites.

* The government regularly documented worker health risks at many of the private facilities doing weapons work, producing highly classified reports that detailed radiation exposure rates hundreds of times above its safety standards.

The Institute for Energy and Environmental Research, hired by USA TODAY to provide an expert review of old radiation data on three contracting operations, estimates that workers in the riskiest jobs had a 40% chance of dying from cancer -- an increase of 200% over the general population -- as well as higher odds for respiratory and kidney ills. But there's no telling how many, if any, workers have gotten sick or died from their exposures; they've gotten virtually no medical study.

* Dozens of companies doing weapons work contaminated the air, soil and water with toxic and radioactive waste. Studies done at the time documented some operations pumping hundreds of pounds of uranium dust into the sky each month and others dumping thousands of pounds of solid and liquid wastes on the ground or into creeks, rivers and sewers.

Federal officials sometimes endorsed such practices as cheap, easy ways to get rid of hazardous byproducts that in many cases left contamination that persists today. As with the workers' health, there's been no effort to assess whether the hazards made anyone ill.

* Both the government and executives at the companies it hired for weapons work hid the health and environmental problems.

Federal officials misled workers, insisting their jobs were safe despite having evidence to the contrary. Surviving employees still have not been told of their risks, though screening and early treatment could boost their odds for surviving some illnesses they might face as a result of their work.

Likewise, communities were left unaware of toxic and radioactive waste spilling from behind the innocuous facades of local businesses. The secrecy that shrouded the weapons program's contracting still masks residual contamination at some sites.

"It was a different time, the Cold War was on," says Arthur Piccot, 81, a health and safety monitor with the weapons program in the late '40s and '50s.

Producing weapons "was the priority, period," he says. "A lot of these places were modified (for weapons work) in a hurry. There might be a hole in the roof for ventilation. . . . We did what we could to protect (workers). The radioactive waste, we didn't think much about it. People didn't (fully) understand the risks."

[Illustration]
PHOTO, Color, Robert Deutsch, USA TODAY; PHOTO, B/W, American Medical Association archives; Caption: "They always assured us there was no danger": Lewis Malcolm was exposed to hazardous uranium and thorium dust on the job at a Lockport, N.Y., plant that did contracting work for the nuclear weapons program. He died of kidney failure in June. His story, 15A. Metal dust: A metal-rolling mill similar to those used at Simonds. The ventilator hood atop the machine removed dust; for years at Simonds, work was done on radioactive materials using unventilated mills.

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