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Uranium workers' benefits may rise

By Katherine Rizzo

The Associated Press

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WASHINGTON - Thousands of ailing uranium miners would be eligible for extra benefits while sick weapons-plant workers would get compensation for the first time under a deal reached Thursday by House and Senate negotiators.

The cost was estimated at almost \$1 billion over the first five years, congressional aides said. Money for the benefits would be

an entitlement, meaning that spending would be mandatory and immune from the yearly appropriations process.

"This is a victory for the men and women who helped this country win the Cold War," said Sen. Fred Thompson, R-Tenn.

An advocate for the miners, Paul Robinson, estimated that about 10,000 uranium miners, millers and transporters might be eligible for the enhanced benefits. That would be in addition to the

estimated 3,000 to 4,000 sick weapons-plant workers expected to qualify for compensation.

At the insistence of Rep. Henry Hyde, bargainers agreed that the miners should receive the same financial aid and health benefits as uranium enrichment plant workers.

Uranium miners already have federal compensation available, capped at \$100,000 and excluding health care.

Under the agreement, those miners - plus uranium mill workers and transport workers - would be eligible for \$50,000 more, plus medical benefits.

Workers at the uranium enrichment plants in Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee who are sick from radiation exposure would be eligible for \$150,000 plus health care.