

Bill holds money for nuclear weapons workers

HELP: *The house approved the measure, which includes legislation to compensate sick workers and their families with medical and financial assistance.*

By Valerie E. Pillo
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Relief may be in sight for thousands of ailing nuclear weapons workers and their families.

The House of Representatives on Wednesday overwhelmingly approved the fiscal year 2001 Defense Authorization Conference Report, which includes legislation to compensate sick workers and their families with medical and financial help.

As many as 14,000 Cold War-era workers made sick by their jobs at nuclear weapons plants or uranium mines will each receive \$150,000 and government-paid health care under the bill. Senate passage was expected and Energy Department officials have said President Clinton will sign it.

Under the bill, each worker made sick by exposure to radiation, beryllium or silica will receive a lump sum payment of \$150,000 and medical benefits for life. Heirs of dead workers will receive only the payment. The Congressional Budget Office estimates the program will cost taxpayers about \$1.9 billion over 10 years.

"I support the agreement, it is the least we should do," U.S. Rep. John J. LaFalce, D-Kenmore, said Wednesday. "These men and women deserve more and I will continue to work with members on both sides of the aisle to press for expanded aid to include lost wages for all affected workers, or their survivors, and expanded eligibility to cover workers suffering

employed at manufacturing."

Mary Jeffords, a local resident who heads the Injured Workers of New York Inc., said compensation is needed for the former workers and their families but agrees with LaFalce that more needs to be done.

"My biggest concern is they compensate all workers even the ones getting cancer today," Jeffords said. "It seems like they're piece-mealing. People will fall through the cracks, just like in workers compensation. They deserve more than that. A lot of the most seriously injured people end up falling through the cracks or pushed to the back.

"I'm going to take a wait and see attitude. It is good news, though."

A recent USA Today investigation revealed the U.S. government used hundreds of companies during the Cold War era to handle dangerous materials used to make nuclear weapons, exposing thousands of workers to

potential health risks. Several Niagara County companies were involved in the program, including Hooker Electrochemical, Electro Metallurgical, Titanium Alloys Manufacturing and Niagara Smelting Division, all in Niagara Falls. In the Town of Tonawanda, the Linde Air Products Division was involved. Remediation continues at Linde.

At each plant, risks unknown to workers included exposure to high levels of radioactive dust and vapors, as well as building contamination, according to government records recently declassified.

A provision in the bill gives the executive branch until March 15 to come up with an alternative compensation plan. Congress would then have until July 31 to pass it or the original plan would take effect.

The Clinton administration has given no indication it will pursue this option, though a Gore or Bush administration could choose to do so.

WEAPONS PROGRAM SITES

The House voted Wednesday to give medical care and money to nuclear weapons plant workers who contracted cancer or incurable lung disease because of exposure to beryllium, radiation or silica.

The list shows area sites known to have handled silica, beryllium or radioactive materials for the nuclear weapons program run since World War II by the Energy Department and its predecessor, the Atomic Energy Commission. The list is not meant to indicate whether those materials remain at the sites or whether the sites subjected workers to unprotected exposure. For each state, the list shows the name of the site, its location and what was done there.

■ Ashland Oil 1, Tonawanda: Disposal of radioactive

materials.

■ Ashland Oil 2, Tonawanda: Disposal of radioactive materials.

■ Bethlehem Steel, Lackawanna: Fuel and target fabrication.

■ Bliss & Laughlin Steel, Buffalo: Fuel and target fabrication.

■ Electromet Niagara Falls: Fuel and target fabrication.

■ Linde Air Products, Tonawanda: Uranium hexafluoride conversion, refining and processing.

■ Niagara Falls Storage Site, Lewiston: Storage of radioactive materials.

■ Niagara Falls Storage Site Vicinity Properties, Lewiston: Storage of radioactive materials.

■ Seaway Industrial Park, Tonawanda: Storage of radioactive materials.

■ Simonds Saw & Steel Co., Lockport: Fuel and target fabrication.