

GOVERNMENT

Cold War work sites in WNY on U.S. list

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WASHINGTON — The government Thursday identified hundreds of mills, foundries and factories — 13 of them in Erie and Niagara counties — that did nuclear weapons work during the Cold War, in a step toward identifying workers who might qualify for compensation because they were made sick by their jobs.

The Energy Department examined records going back 60 years in an effort to document every facility that handled the deadly metal beryllium or radioactive materials.

Energy Secretary Bill Richardson urged sick workers who were employed at the facilities to contact the government.

"The burden of proof is on the government, not the worker. We will be open and candid this time, not like in the past," he said at a news conference.

The list includes 317 sites that employed 600,000 people in 37 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Marshall Islands. Some were government-owned, but most were private companies that did business for the Energy Department or the Atomic Energy Commission.

The Western New York sites are: Ashland Oil, the Linde Ceramics Plant and Seaway Industrial Park, all in the Town of Tonawanda; Bethlehem Steel, Lackawanna; Bliss & Laughlin Steel, Linde Air Products and Utica Street Warehouse, all in Buffalo; Electro Metallurgical, Hooker Electrochemical and Titanium Alloys Manufacturing, all in Niagara Falls; Lake Ontario Ordnance Works in the Town of Lewiston; Simonds Saw and Steel Co., Lockport; and the West Valley Demonstration Project, West Valley.

David Michaels, the Energy Department's top health official, cautioned that some of the sites played very minor roles in weapons production.

For example, while Mallinckrodt Chemical Co. in St. Louis processed thousands of tons of uranium, Star Cutter Corp. in Farmington, Mich., only had five pieces of uranium on site for one day while testing a special saw.

Ailing workers and the families of many dead workers spent years pushing the government to take responsibility for illnesses caused by on-the-job exposure to high levels of radiation.

Many sick workers complained they could not get adequate care because the substances to which they were exposed were considered classified information.

As recently as President Clinton's first term, the government routinely fought workers' compensation claims.

"We failed to take care of workers that got sick from exposure," Richardson said, adding it now is time "to settle the score with our workers."

Under a program approved by Congress last year, employees of facilities doing Energy Department work who contracted cancer as a result of radiation exposure, as well as those who contracted a lung disease from beryllium or silica, can receive government-paid medical care plus \$150,000. The first checks should go out later this year.

Many of the privately owned sites have not performed work for the Energy Department for decades.

Still to be decided is how the compensation program will determine which people from such sites got sick because of work done for the government.

"This is a very sensitive area," said Richard Miller, a workers' advocate from Holyoke, Mass. "There are places where the DOE had no contract for, for instance, beryllium after a certain date, or a mill didn't roll uranium after a certain date, but the buildings remained contaminated."

The Energy Department's toll-free number for workers seeking information is (877) 447-9756.