



## **U.S. TO PAY WORKERS FOR RADIATION EXPOSURE**

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The U.S. government reversed decades of denial on Wednesday and proposed paying at least \$400 million to thousands of ailing workers who were exposed to radiation while building the nation's nuclear arsenal.

Energy Secretary Bill Richardson called the people who worked at the nuclear plants "courageous" and essential to winning World War II and the Cold War.

But he said they often were not told what they were working with and, in part because of the secrecy surrounding their jobs, they were denied compensation when they got cancer or other radiation-caused diseases.

"Justice for our nuclear workers is finally happening," Richardson said at a news conference announcing the program. "The government for a change is on their side and not against them."

Under the compensation plan, which would have to be approved by Congress, nuclear workers who got sick would receive payments for past medical bills and lost pay. Those with certain cancers would be eligible for compensation beginning at \$100,000.

Richardson said the biggest change in policy is that the government will not contest many of the claims and workers would receive the benefit of the doubt when plant medical records are missing or flawed.

"The burden of proof is on the government and not on the worker," he said. "We're not going to make workers find past records because in many cases the workers weren't told the truth."

He said after some start-up costs in fiscal 2001 his department would seek \$120 million a year for three years and then another \$70 million after that.

The cost is expected to decline as cases are settled.

The production of 70,000 nuclear weapons over 50 years employed more than 600,000 people at 16 major sites and dozens of smaller ones.

Workers testified in a series of recent hearings that they were frequently exposed to high levels of radiation as well as hazardous chemicals.

The U.S. government in January confirmed for the first time that nuclear weapons workers exposed to radiation and chemicals experienced higher-than-expected cancer rates, reversing years in which the government minimized the dangers of exposure to radiation.

Under the plan the Energy Department would set up a workers' advocacy office, effective in May, to help current and former employees who believe they suffer from job-related illnesses.



The new Occupational Illness Compensation Office would expedite claims, using independent physicians to determine if illnesses are work-related. Once a link was clear, the Department of Energy would accept responsibility for the illness.

At his news conference, Richardson was joined by many members of Congress who represented the areas that were sites for the largest nuclear facilities or nuclear testing grounds.

Richardson said the department will try to organize broad-based support in Congress because action was needed this year before more victims suffered or died.