



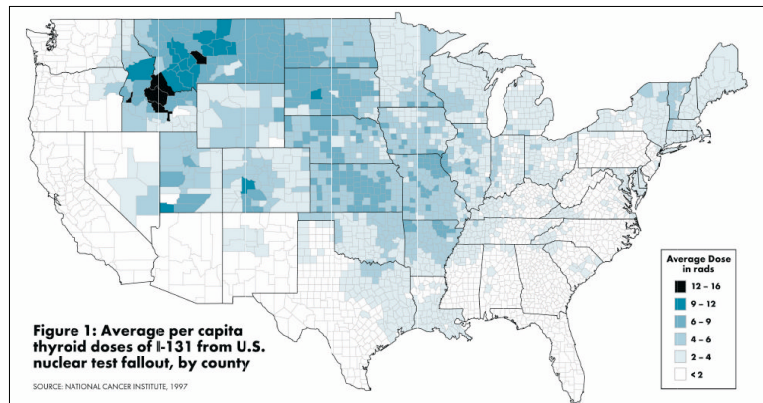
# Wanted: Justice for Nuclear Testing Victims



Nearly 2,000 nuclear weapons tests have been conducted worldwide. The U.S. alone conducted 217 above-ground tests, about half of them at the Department of Energy's Nevada Test Site (NTS), from the early 1950s to the early 1960s. Atmospheric fallout from these tests, and from the 30 underground tests known to have "vented" significant radiation, contained harmful radionuclides and was carried thousands of miles from the test site. At the time, the U.S. government assured the American public that testing was safe and necessary to protect them.

In 1983, Congress directed the National Cancer Institute (NCI) to study the health impacts of U.S. nuclear testing fallout, in particular radioactive iodine, I-131. *Fourteen years later*, due in large part to pressure from Members of Congress and public interest groups including the Alliance for Nuclear Accountability (ANA), the study was released in 1997.

The study results were shocking: Millions of people in the U.S. born between the mid-1940s and early 1960s received significant doses of I-131 from Nevada Test Site fallout. Hot spots occurred thousands of miles from the test site—as far as New York, Vermont, Montana, the Dakotas, Missouri and Iowa. Figure 1 is a reproduction of one of the NCI maps. The study's data indicated that some children in high



This map represents only *average* doses, not highs and lows. For more detailed maps, see Chapter 8 of the NCI report at <http://rex.nci.nih.gov/massmedia/Fallout/contents.html>. (Map credit: PSR, [www.psr.org](http://www.psr.org))

fallout areas who drank goat's milk in the 1950s were as severely exposed as the worst-exposed children after the 1986 Chernobyl accident.

The 1997 NCI report estimated that between 11,300 and 212,000 excess thyroid cancers would be expected to occur in the U.S. population due to I-131 exposure from Nevada Test Site fallout.

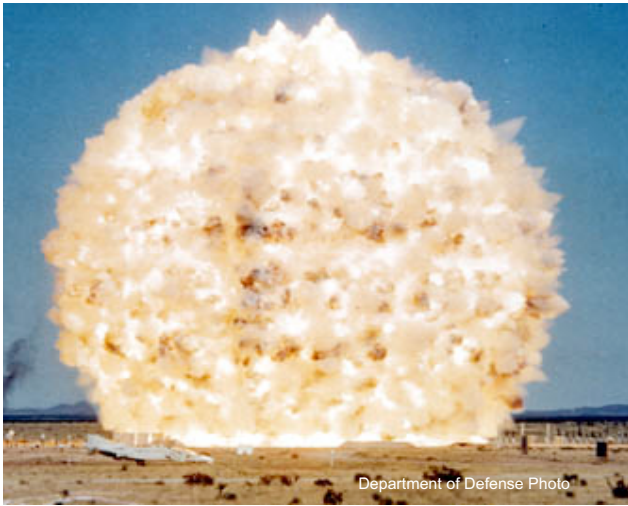
Last year, NCI and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) responded to pressure from ANA and released a report on *global* fallout that was mandated by Congress in 1998. The report concluded that additional radionuclides in fallout and contamination from other nations' nuclear tests would likely increase the NCI cancer risk estimates by about 15 percent.

## Recommendations

- Support legislation to include every county in South Dakota, Montana, Utah, and Idaho under the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act.
- Preserve the moratorium on nuclear weapons testing.

## **The Radiation Exposure Compensation Act**

As a result of pressure from downwinders (people living downwind of NTS who were made sick by fallout), public interest groups and lawsuits, the Senate, under the leadership of Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT), passed the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act of 1990 (RECA). The law provides modest compensation to individuals exposed to radiation who meet certain criteria. The program provides lump-sum payments for uranium miners, millers, and ore transporters; certain people present



Divine Strake, a simulated nuclear blast similar to the one pictured, was recently cancelled due to overwhelming public opposition.

at nuclear tests; and residents from a handful of counties in Utah, Nevada, and Arizona who lived in the area during the time of atmospheric testing and contracted a listed cancer. This legislation was historic: it was the first time the government publicly acknowledged that uranium workers and downwinders had been harmed by the U.S. nuclear weapons program and deserved redress.

After passage of RECA, it became evident that the program, though well-intentioned, did not serve as many people as it should. In an effort to remedy this problem, Sen. Hatch introduced a bill to update RECA. His successful 2000 amendment expanded the uranium worker claimant category and made it more claimant-friendly. It also made residents of seven additional counties eligible for downwinder compensation.

While RECA and its amendments have brought a modicum of justice to people made sick by nuclear testing, the act needs further improvement. As it now stands, the program compensates people in certain high fallout areas (e.g., some Utah counties) while denying those in other, higher fallout areas (e.g., Idaho, the Dakotas, Montana, etc.).

In the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress, Idaho senators Mike Crapo (R-ID) and Larry Craig (R-ID) and former Montana Senator Conrad Burns (R-MT) introduced legislation that would add both states to RECA, but it did not move forward. The senators have not reintroduced the legislation this session.

### **Public Attitudes About Testing**

Public sentiment against testing – nuclear or not – is strong. This opposition was made clear when the Department of Defense publicized a plan to conduct a massive nonnuclear test explosion at the Nevada Test Site in 2006. The “Divine Strake” test was designed to help identify the “smallest proper nuclear yield” needed to destroy underground targets.

Skeptics questioned the federal government’s assurances that no nuclear material from past tests would be dispersed in the expected 10,000-foot high mushroom cloud. The proposed test also raised concerns that the experiment could lead to resumed nuclear testing. A huge swell of grassroots opposition rose to stop the test. People from Utah, Nevada, Idaho, and nationwide submitted 11,000 public comments opposing the test, testified at hearings, made countless phone calls, and held rallies. In February 2007, the Defense Department announced the cancellation of the “Divine Strake” test.

### **Conclusion**

In light of the toll nuclear weapons testing has taken on the health of the people those weapons were supposed to protect, it is disappointing that the Bush Administration is promoting programs that could lead to new nuclear weapons designs and production facilities, including the so-called Reliable Replacement Warhead Program and the Complex 2030 proposal. These programs increase the likelihood that the U.S. will resume nuclear testing. Rather than pursuing dangerous, unnecessary programs, the government should instead honor its obligation to help people already poisoned by U.S. nuclear weapons testing.

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