

From the Marshall Islands Journal Friday, September 17, 2004



RMI, atolls blast DOE health cuts

Rongelap Councilwoman Rokko Langinbelik was among dozens of four-atollers — many of whom held signs protesting US government actions — who turned out at the DOE meeting Wednesday in Majuro. Representing the United States (inset) at the annual two-day meeting are (l-r) Ambassador Greta Morris, deputy assistant secretary of the Department of Energy Rick Jones and DOE's Bill Jackson. Reports, P3 and 8.

DOE blasted for cutbacks

By GIFF JOHNSON

While US officials called for cooperation and goodwill this week, RMI and four atoll leaders blasted the US government for cutbacks in its programs for radiation-affected Marshall Islanders.

The annual review of Department of Energy (DOE) programs in the RMI was held Wednesday and Thursday this week in Majuro, and from the opening statements

Wednesday it was clear that it was to be the most contentious DOE meeting since the mid-1990s.

“My message to the Bush Administration is that the RMI government is appalled by the US government’s decision to reduce and eliminate DOE’s programs in the Marshall Islands,” Foreign Minister Gerald Zackios said in uncharacteristically blunt language.

US Ambassador Greta Morris opened the meeting by commenting that “this year’s meeting is particularly important because of the need to consider some potential changes in the DOE medical and environmental programs to make them more effective and to respond to budget constraints.”

She asked all participants to show a “spirit of cooperation as we look at the available options”, and added that “if all of us approach our discussions in a spirit of goodwill and partnership, we will be able to address positively the challenges before us.”

Islanders from the four atolls attended the meeting and held up signs in protest at the US budget cutbacks and concerns on other issues.

Zackios expressed unhappiness with the US’s unilateral action to cut programs “without our input or knowledge,” saying the RMI wants the opportunity to participate in these decisions.

Zackios also said that while he recognized that the US officials had to deal with bureaucracies and budgets, “please understand that the people in this room have sick families and lands they cannot inhabit as part of their daily realities.”

He slammed the US plan to drop its monitoring of the ‘control’ populations on Rongelap and Utrik, groups of people who were “exposed to extremely high levels of radiation.”

Zackios asked the US not to make major changes to the program while the RMI is working with the US Congress “in hopes of fixing these (budget) problems.”

Zackios called the drastic changes to the DOE programs “a severe blow to our friendship, and to our relationship. We want both the Bush Administration and the Congress to know that we are angry and we feel betrayed.”

James: ‘Rongelap bombed again’

Although in recent years, the US has made great strides to improve the situation of nuclear test-exposed Rongelap Islanders, today the “people of Rongelap feel they have been bombed again,” Rongelap Mayor James Matayoshi told US officials at the DOE meeting this week.

“We are suffering the fallout of US budget cuts. This budget bomb threatens to blow up all the progress that the US has made in improving the health and welfare of the people of Rongelap.”

Matayoshi said the changes being proposed by the DOE “threaten to contaminate the trust, goodwill and partnership that we have developed with the US.”

He criticized the decision of the US to stop providing medical services to certain islanders who suffered chronic radiation exposure on contaminated islands, and who have received medical care from the US since the 1950s.

“Discontinuing DOE medical services to these individuals is not medically, morally or legally responsible,” Matayoshi said.

He also expressed concern about environmental monitoring.

“On the eve of the groundbreaking of the first new homes constructed on Rongelap in the past 20 years, we are told — today, for the first time — that external radiation measurements for these homesites may not occur in 2005,” he said.

He asked the US officials at the meeting to report to decision makers in Washington that the proposals presented “are not acceptable and fail to address the moral and legal responsibilities of the US toward the Marshallese people.”

Editorial:

Washington: Don't forget our history

The inadequacy of the United States's response to its nuclear legacy in the Marshall Islands is becoming more and more apparent. An indifferent Washington bureaucracy is slashing funding to essential environmental and medical programs that threatens to undo health improvements and significant progress made toward atoll resettlement — to say nothing of the impact on relations between the two nations.

Three issues, in particular, stand out:

- The Department of Energy has announced it is no longer required to provide monitoring of Rongelap and Utrik ‘control’ populations — monitoring that has been provided for 50 years. These ‘control’ populations, in some cases, were exposed to as much or more radiation from living in radioactive environments and eating contaminated food, than the people received who were on some of these islands during the Bravo test in 1954.
- The US government is no longer providing funding to the 177 Health Plan that provides primary care services to the people of the four acknowledged nuclear test-affected atolls.
- More than four years since the RMI first filed its nuclear test compensation (‘changed circumstances’) petition with the US Congress, according to the terms of the Compact of Free Association, neither the US administration nor the Congress have provided a formal response to the Marshall Islands.

There are numerous other concerns, including the US cutback in radiological monitoring support, that have prompted government officials and people from these islands to question the commitment of the US government to the ongoing health and safety of people and islands affected by US nuclear testing.

The US government maintains that the first Compact provided “full and final” compensation for the harm caused by the testing. But medical and environmental needs of affected populations did not somehow magically disappear on September 30 last year, when the first Compact ended.

There can be no argument that the United States government has an ongoing responsibility to take care of problems its nuclear policies caused in the Marshall Islands. But Washington obviously needs to be reminded repeatedly and forcefully that it cannot wash its hands of its nuclear legacy.