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New N-test figures given to Congress

By GIFF JOHNSON

For years, Marshall Islanders have disputed the US government's definition of radiation 'exposed' people — a debate that goes to the core question of the fairness of US-provided medical care and compensation programs.

Since the 1954 Bravo test, American officials have accepted as 'exposed' only the small number of people living on Rongelap and Utrik during the March 1 Bravo test, while all of the many hundreds who later returned to live on these two atolls are considered 'unexposed' — despite the fact that they absorbed significant levels of radiation from living in and eating food from contaminated environments.

In addition, this determination of 'exposed' versus 'unexposed' limited medical programs and Compact-provided compensation to just four atolls.

Testimony delivered late last month in Washington, DC, sheds further light on the 'exposed'/'unexposed' debate for the entire Marshall Islands, not just the so-called 'exposed' populations.

Nuclear Claims Tribunal Public Advocate Bill Graham provided a briefing to and answered questions from a group of US Congress staff in Washington. One element of his presentation focused on comparing the compensation programs for Americans and Marshallese exposed to nuclear tests.

In the US, people who lived near the Nevada Test Site during the nuclear testing period and later developed certain cancers and other health problems have been, like Marshallese, automatically provided with compensation funded by the US Congress. This US group of nuclear test victims is known as 'Downwinders'.

Graham's testimony compared the exposure levels of the American Downwinders with Marshallese.

The average highest exposure of people living near the Nevada Test Site, and who are eligible for compensation, is lower than the lowest average exposure in the Marshall Islands, according to Graham.

"This is pretty powerful information," Graham told the Journal. The information has been available since the 1990s, but no one has compared the exposures of people in the two compensation programs, he said.

"It's information that no one has acknowledged before."

Graham said that it shows that the Tribunal's decision to provide compensation for certain illnesses to anyone who had lived in the RMI during the testing period was reasonable and fair.

According to documentation that Graham provided to the US Congressional officials, the average individual external exposure of the Downwinders during the test period 1951-1958 was .47 rem (a measurement of radiation).

According to Graham, this is a lower average exposure than any person received who was living in the RMI during the testing period.

Even the least exposed 185 people living on Ujae Atoll during this period had an

average dose of .51 rem, according to a summary of exposure data that Graham provided to Congressional officials.

People on Ailuk, for example, received an average dose of 18 rem — 35 times the highest average Downwinder dose — but are not considered ‘exposed’ by the US.

The United States adopted the view that “health impacts of the nuclear testing program were confined to a very small population,” and this led to “limited” efforts to study radiation exposures and their consequences in other parts of the Marshall Islands, which were said to be ‘unexposed’, Graham said in his presentation.

This implied that “the RMI population at large either received no radiation exposures from any of the 67 nuclear tests or that exposures were so small so as to be of no consequence.”

But, said Graham, information declassified by the US government in 1994 “revealed that significant doses were monitored throughout the Marshall Islands following not only the Bravo test but also after each of the other tests conducted during Operation Castle in 1954.”

Graham said that this, coupled with the knowledge that the total explosive force of the 67 tests at Bikini and Enewetak was 93 times that of all the atmospheric tests in Nevada, led the Tribunal to have scientists conduct a comprehensive review of the fallout doses received by Marshall Islanders on 21 ‘unexposed’ atolls.

“The results of that assessment indicate that the average individual external radiation dose to populations at every atoll in the Marshall Islands exceeded the average exposures of those individuals living in the six counties closest to the Nevada Test Site during the respective periods of atmospheric testing,” Graham said in his Congressional briefing.

In addition to this, Marshallese were exposed to much higher levels of radioactive iodine, which concentrates in the thyroid. In 1998, scientists at the US Centers for Disease Control estimated that the 67 nuclear tests at Bikini and Enewetak produced 42 times more radioactive iodine than the Nevada tests.

Graham observed that given these facts about the higher levels of exposure to Marshallese than to American Downwinders, the Tribunal’s policy of presuming that people who lived anywhere in the Marshall Islands during the testing period and subsequently developed one of 35 approved medical problems are automatically entitled to compensation is “both reasonable and credible.”

NCT fund at \$5.8m

From 1991 to May 7 this year, the Nuclear Claims Tribunal has awarded \$84,070,250 in compensation for personal injury claims.

Of that amount, the Tribunal has actually paid out \$70,007,252.50.

This leaves slightly over \$14 million that is still owed to claimants by the Tribunal. As of April 12, the nuclear investment fund stood at \$5.8 million, casting doubt on the ability of the Tribunal to fully pay all of the awards that it has made for personal injury claims.

A total of 1,880 people have been awarded compensation. A few of the claimants have received awards for more than one medical condition.

US: You must rem-ember this

American scientists calculated the nuclear test exposures for 180,000 people living downwind of the Nevada Test Site in the 1950s, reporting their findings in a 1990 issue of the magazine Health Physics.

Their report showed that:

- 61,000 people (about one third of the population) received less than .10 of a rem.
- 80,000 people received up to .50 of a rem.
- 19,000 people received from .5 to 1 rem.
- 20,000 people received 1 to 5 rems.
- 520 people received 5 to 10 rems.
- 45 people received 10 to 15 rems.

The total average exposure for all 180,000 Americans, who are known as 'Downwinders', was .47 (or about half of one) rem.

Downwinders are eligible for nuclear test compensation if they develop any of 19 types of cancer.

In contrast, according to the Nuclear Claims Tribunal in Majuro, the following islands and atolls (excluding the recognized exposed atolls of Rongelap, Bikini, Enewetak and Utrik) and their populations received average exposures amount to:

- Ujae, Lae, Lib and Namu, 744 people, .51 to .88 of a rem.
- Namdrik, Jabat, Ailinglaplap, Kili, Aur, Ebon, Mili, Majuro and Maloelap, 5,489 people, 1.1 to 1.9 rems.
- Jaluit and Arno, 2,265 people, 2.0 and 2.2 rems, respectively.
- Wotho, 47 people, 3.3 rems.
- Kwajalein, 1,042 people, 5.6 rems.
- Likiep and Wotje, 939 people, 6.7 and 7.9 rems, respectively.
- Mejit and Ailuk, 720 people, 15.3 and 18 rems, respectively.

The average exposure for the 11,061 Marshallese living on these islands between 1946 and 1958 was 3.51 rems — or about seven times higher than the average for the Downwinders in the US.