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McClatchy reports: 33,480 Americans dead after 70 years of atomic weaponry

Will modernization of nation's old nuclear weapons overlook risks of past?

Query interactive database of 107,394 sick or dead workers

U.S. hopes to save money by cutting medical benefits for nuclear workers

<http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/national/article49216310.html>

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The U.S. government has compensated over 52,000 nuclear workers illnesses related to radiation exposure, but the process is complicated. Deaths resulting from exposure while working at the plants and the compensation process for survivors begs the question: How much is a life worth?
Brittany Peterson McClatchy

“Irradiated,” a special report published today by McClatchy, offers an unprecedented look at the costs of war and the risks of a strong defense, using federal records to chronicle the deaths of at least 33,480 nuclear workers who helped the U.S. win World War II and the Cold War.

The number of deaths has never been disclosed by federal officials. It's more than four times the number of American casualties in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. And it looms large as the

nation prepares for its second nuclear age, with a \$1 trillion plan to modernize its nuclear weapons over the next 30 years.

McClatchy determined the count after analyzing more than 70 million records in a database obtained from the U.S. Department of Labor under the Freedom of Information Act. It includes all workers who are dead after they or their survivors received compensation under a special fund created in 2001 to help those who got sick in the construction of America's nuclear arsenal.

A total of 107,394 workers have been diagnosed with cancers and other diseases after building the nation's nuclear stockpile over the last seven decades. The project includes an interactive database that offers details on all 107,394 workers.

McClatchy's yearlong investigation, set in 10 states, puts readers in the living rooms of sick workers in South Carolina, on a picket line in Texas and at a cemetery in Tennessee. It includes interviews with more than 100 workers, government officials, experts and activists and across the country.

Among the other findings:

— Federal officials greatly underestimated how sick the U.S. nuclear workforce would become. At first, the government predicted the compensation program would serve only 3,000 people at an annual cost of \$120 million. Fourteen years later, taxpayers have spent sevenfold that estimate, \$12 billion.

— Even though costs have ballooned, federal records show that fewer than half of those workers who sought help had their claims approved by the U.S. Department of Labor.

— Despite the cancers and other illnesses among nuclear works, the government now wants to save money by cutting current employees' health plans, retirement benefits and sick leave.

— And stronger safety standards have not stopped accidents or day-to-day radiation exposure; more than 186,000 workers have been exposed since 2001, all but assuring a new generation of claimants.

McClatchy reported the project in partnership with The Investigative Fund of the Nation Institute, a nonprofit media center based in New York City.

Three journalists from the McClatchy Washington Bureau — Rob Hotakainen, Lindsay Wise and Samantha Ehlinger — reported the project, along with Frank Matt from The Investigative Fund. Other reporters contributing included Mike Fitzgerald of the Belleville News-Democrat in Illinois, Rocky Barker of the Idaho Statesman, Sammy Fretwell of The State of Columbia, S.C.,

Yamil Berard of the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, Scott Canon of The Kansas City Star and Annette Cary of the Tri-City Herald in Washington state.