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Govt. Concedes Radiation Exposure

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By H. JOSEF HEBERT, Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) - Reversing a position held for decades, the government has concluded for the first time that many workers who built America's nuclear weapons likely became ill because of exposure to radiation or toxic chemicals, officials said Saturday.

The findings, based on a review of dozens of studies and raw medical data covering an estimated 600,000 workers at 14 nuclear weapons sites, could lead to compensation to the families of some of the workers. Many were unaware that they were being exposed to such health risks.

While the draft report of the studies did not show a direct causal link between workplace exposures and specific illnesses, it found that workers at the plants suffered higher than normal rates of a wide range of cancers and clearly were exposed to cancer-causing radiation and chemicals in the workplace.

The studies, reviewed by a special task force, examined health records and other data covering three decades of the Cold War from the late 1940s into the 1960s. An official familiar with the report emphasized it does not relate to workers' conditions today.

But the draft report, which President Clinton ordered last July, marks a reversal in the government's long-standing position that no links exist between work conducted at the Cold War-era weapons

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plants and later illnesses. That argument has stymied numerous lawsuits seeking compensation.

While the compensation issue has yet to be resolved, the government now is acknowledging that hundreds - perhaps thousands - of workers may well have been made sick by their working environment.

"It does appear that in the DOE complex, there is a direct link between exposure and the possibility of contamination," Energy Secretary Bill Richardson said in Davos, Switzerland, where he is accompanying President Clinton at an economic forum.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Richardson cautioned that the findings are preliminary and won't be completed for several months. Still, Richardson said, if the findings are borne out, "The honorable thing for the government to do is to protect its workers, past and present," including compensation.

The report said elevated rates of 22 categories of cancer were found among workers at 14 facilities in the department's atomic weapons complex. They included leukemia, Hodgkin's lymphoma and cancers of the prostate, kidney, salivary gland and lung.

"The exposures we are seeing are in excess" of those in similar population groups, a source familiar with the report said. "We don't know what the cause is, but it's clearly related to exposure there (in the workplace)."

President Clinton ordered the review after the Energy Department concluded the government should compensate workers who had developed an incurable lung disease because of exposure to beryllium, a material used in nuclear weapons production.

Richardson and the White House wanted to determine if other nuclear weapons plant workers likewise should be compensated because of exposure to plutonium, uranium and a variety of radioactive or highly toxic substances. The interagency group reviewed dozens of epidemiological studies, raw health data and other documents, many of which in the past have been dismissed by the government.

The draft report makes no conclusion on compensation, which will be examined in the coming months. Recommendations are likely in the final report. One official said compensation most likely would be to families "in the hundreds, not thousands," although the number at this time remains little more than a guess.

Clinton will use the final report to develop a recommendation to

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Congress, which is responsible for providing the money.

The draft report's conclusions were first reported Saturday by The New York Times.

Daniel J. Guttman, an attorney for the Paper, Allied-Industrial Chemical and Energy Workers Union, told the Times the government turnabout was stunning, because for years the government has marginalized the risks to the thousands of weapons plant workers.

The report's findings included workers at plutonium production facilities at Savannah River in South Carolina and Hanford in Washington state; the Rocky Flats plant near Denver, where plutonium was molded into weapons components; uranium enrichment and processing plants at the Oak Ridge, Tenn., complex; the Fernald uranium processing plant near Cincinnati; and the Lawrence Livermore and Los Alamos national laboratories in California and New Mexico, respectively.

None of the plants still produce nuclear weapons.

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