Former uranium workers and their spouses, many with debilitating health conditions, sat down around a dining room table in Grants, New Mexico, in January 2007 to devise a survey of those who worked after 1971 in the New Mexico uranium industry. Workers before 1971 are compensated for a small group of uranium-related illnesses through the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA). But many sick post-1971 uranium workers believe their medical conditions are also related to working with uranium. They formed the Post ’71 Uranium Workers Committee (P’71) and, after several unsuccessful attempts to secure help from professional researchers, created their own survey with questions about working conditions and worker/family health. The survey was posted on the organization’s website and distributed at meetings around northern New Mexico. These efforts, aided by word of mouth, resulted in 1,300 completed surveys primarily from NM but also some from 23 other states.

Needing help with data analysis, P’71 applied to the Southwest Studies Program of The Colorado College (CCSWS) which provides a research team to southwestern communities involved in Community-Based Research Projects. A team comprising a faculty advisor and three student research fellows began analysis of the health conditions portion of the survey in summer 2009. As data analysis revealed patterns in the surveys, it is unlikely that the post-1971 uranium workers will be considered for the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA).”

As data analysis revealed patterns in medical conditions, the CCSWS team decided to research uranium-related medical conditions recognized by other U.S. federal agencies. They formed the Post ’71 Uranium Workers Committee (P’71) and, after several unsuccessful attempts to secure help from professional researchers, created their own survey with questions about working conditions and worker/family health. The survey was posted on the organization’s website and distributed at meetings around northern New Mexico. These efforts, aided by word of mouth, resulted in 1,300 completed surveys primarily from NM but also some from 23 other states.

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As data analysis revealed patterns in medical conditions, the CCSWS team decided to research uranium-related medical conditions recognized by other U.S. federal agencies. They found that four agencies — the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), and RECA which is administered by the Department of Justice (DOJ) — found more than 20 medical conditions (illnesses and symptoms) attributed to working with uranium.

HEALTH CONDITIONS FINDINGS

In the supplemental survey, workers were asked to describe their health using the same descriptors (excellent, very good, good, fair, poor) as the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) of a sample of U.S. citizens. The most current NHANES survey (2006) revealed that 19% of U.S. citizens said their health was fair or poor. However, the Post ’71 survey revealed that 80% of the former uranium workers reported they were in fair or poor health.

Health findings also included:

- Seventy-two percent of P’71 workers reported one or more uranium-related medical conditions (illnesses and symptoms) recognized by OSHA, EPA, the CDC, and DOJ-RECA.
- Thirty percent of female workers and 40% of female spouses reporting one or more reproductive disorders, including miscarriages, stillbirths, and bearing children with birth defects.
- Nine percent of respondents reporting RECA-compensable diseases. (It is unknown what percentage of post ’71 workers has RECA-compensable diseases).
- As expected, nearly 70% of workers reported respiratory conditions. However, not expected were chronic skin disorders as the second highest (nearly 30%) reported condition; and
- Among symptoms reported, as expected, lung problems came first (64%), but joint pain came second (56%).

The P’71 survey indicates that a significant percentage of conditions reported by workers are recognized as uranium-related by four federal agencies. Post ’71 Vice-President Linda Evers contends, “The RECA program should compensate all uranium-related illnesses recognized by the federal government and not just a select few.”

SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Who were those who reported health conditions for themselves and/or their families on the P’71 survey? Most (67%) began working when they were 24 or younger. Those who completed the survey worked an average of 6.6 years in the industry. And Post ’71 survey respondents are not elderly; the median age of those who responded is 54. This means that half of those surveyed were more than 54 and half were less than 54.

Regarding medical treatment, 41% are currently receiving it, 18% were treated in the past, 14% said they could not afford treatment, and 27% did not respond to the question.

Other demographics include:

- Gender: 86% were male and 14% were female.

Post ’71 officers Liz Lucero and Linda Evers concede that the surveys were informal and that the results cannot easily be compared to epidemiological studies of uranium miners and millers from the 1950s, 60s, and early 70s. However, they contend that the surveys complement occupational health studies conducted by Dr. Susan Dawson, a social worker, and Dr. Gary Madsen, a sociologist, at Utah State University, among Navajo and Anglo uranium workers employed from the 1940s to the 1980s. Dawson and Madsen concur: “The post-1971 uranium workers have been largely ignored by epidemiologists. The Post ’71 current grassroots study is very important in helping to document these workers’ work exposures and health issues. Without extensive documentation, it is unlikely that the post-1971 uranium workers will be considered for the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA).”

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Men and women who worked in the uranium industry have untringly and with much vigor, supply to the world its needs, wants, and power. This supply has cost the health and death of many persons. The loss of innocent men, women, and children has gone unappreciated.

Billions of dollars have been enjoyed by our national government and its magnates. While these our leaders have attained to high posts and SKF, due to engineering unmatched power, we, grateful for earning a living, are left to fend for ourselves. The government has taken our lands, women and children, freedom, and now our health. Is it wrong to be properly compensated as bona fide American Citizens?

— COMMENT FROM A NATIVE AMERICAN WORKER

OSHA guidelines for the protection of uranium workers state: “A worker who handles uranium or an insoluble uranium compound should thoroughly wash hands, forearms, and face with soap and water before eating, using tobacco products, or using toilet facilities.” Yet 79% of the workers responding said that there were no wash basins available at work. Several commented that many available basins utilized contaminated waters from the mines.

in the mines. They have better ventilation systems, respirators and face masks, and efficient control of the interior of the mines.” However, a large number of P’71 survey respondents do not agree. Most worked between 1976 and 1986, when stronger regulations were supposedly enforced, but only 14% said that ventilation in their work area was adequate. Thirty-six percent said it was not adequate, and 49% said it was adequate “sometimes.”

Many workers indicated that mine operators knew weeks ahead about the next scheduled MSHA safety inspection. “We were told two to three weeks prior to the [inspectors] coming...to clean everything,” one former miner wrote on his survey form.

Many commented that highly contaminated areas were often closed off for inspections and then reopened for work after the inspector left. As one worker wrote,

“The day before the federal mine inspectors came to the mine, a large (contaminated) area was roped off. The following day a foreman told me to go behind the ropes to haul ore with a loader. I told him it was closed. The foreman removed the rope and said now it was open.”

In survey after survey, workers commented, “All they cared about was production.” Post ’71 leaders charge that the federal government is ultimately responsible for the ill health and deaths among Post ’71 workers because government regulations were too little and too late for them and because of the lax enforcement of those few regulations that were in place.

P’71 is advocating for RECA compensation for Post ’71 workers and for the expansion of RECA-compensable diseases. In addition, the results of the P’71 survey raise several questions indicating the need for more comprehensive health research on uranium workers and their families. Questions they raise include: What is the full impact of exposure to uranium and other contaminants on reproductive systems of workers, families, and future generations? What is the relationship between exposure to uranium in the workplace and the high incidence of arthritis and degenerative joint disease, or cardiovascular and gastrointestinal illnesses found among uranium workers?

“These Post ’71 people are sick and dying now, in their late forties and early fifties,” lamented Evers, a former uranium mill worker who suffers from a painful degenerative bone condition in her wrists that limits the use of her hands. Evers noted that 21 persons who completed the original P’71 survey in 2007-08 were listed as “deceased” on the 2009 supplemental survey. “The Post ’71 uranium workers are being lost at a rate that’s unacceptable. The families of these workers are left without a bread winner, a father, a husband, and now face a very bleak outlook for the future,” Evers added.