

Former BNL workers can get fed funds for cancer

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The federal government has made it easier for people who worked at Brookhaven National Laboratory during the Cold War to get compensation for certain types of cancer linked to on-the-job radiation exposure.

Citing incomplete exposure records for workers at the Upton lab, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius has designated all Brookhaven employees who worked 250 days or more there between 1947 and 1979 as a special class whose health "may have been endangered."

The change streamlines the screening process for a special compensation program set up in 2000 for federal energy and nuclear weapons workers who became ill after being exposed to radiation and other occupational hazards.

Brookhaven workers from that era who were diagnosed with one or more of 22 specific cancers are now eligible for \$150,000 in compensation as well as medical benefits. Brookhaven National Laboratory hired an estimated 15,800 workers between 1947 and 1979, said lab spokeswoman Mona Rowe. It is not known how many of the former workers have been stricken with radiogenic cancers.

A 2008 petition by the spouse of a Brookhaven employee seeking the special designation prompted the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health to review the issue.

"To the best of my knowledge, there was no internal monitoring for some individuals at Brookhaven National Laboratory and insufficient internal monitoring for the class in the early 1980s," the petition said. The institute redacted the petitioner's name and identifying characteristics, citing privacy concerns.

The designation, which took effect last month, could reopen 89 previously rejected compensation cases, according to the federal Department of Labor. The government has paid \$2.4 million in compensation for cancer cases at Brookhaven since the program was set up in late 2000; only 17 of 123 cases submitted to the National Institute for Occupational



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Safety and Health for review have been approved so far.

People who say their cancers were caused by radiation exposure usually undergo a lengthy evaluation by the institute, an arm of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Investigators use worker exposure records to determine how big a dose of radiation an employee received and then calculate the probability that exposure led to cancer.

But at Brookhaven, records for the years up to 1980 were spotty and scattered across different buildings at the Upton campus. That made it difficult to determine whether claimants had been put at risk.

"If we can't estimate the doses we don't know how big they were," said Stuart Hinnefeld, interim director of the NIOSH's office of compensation analysis and support. "The more the dose, the higher the risk of cancer. So if you don't know how big the dose is, it's pretty hard to say that the risk of cancer wasn't enough to satisfy the criteria."

A 2001 state Health Department study found cancer incidence among lab employees was distributed in proportions similar to the rest of Long Island and New York state. The study looked at cancer cases diagnosed between 1979 and 1996; it was criticized by some because it only evaluated workers who still lived in New York State.

Much stricter precautions are taken these days to protect workers, Rowe said. "Somebody who is handling radioactive waste, the waste is packed in special containers. They would be using protective clothing, and minimizing the amount of time that they are exposed." **Who is eligible for compensation**

WHAT

Brookhaven National Laboratory employees who worked there between 1947 and 1979 have been designated as a Special Exposure Cohort - a special class for compensation, in this case for radiation-related cancers. Workers from that era diagnosed with one or more of 22 types of cancer are eligible for \$150,000 and medical expenses.

HOW MANY

15,800 workers were hired at BNL between 1947 and 1979. It's not known how many got the specified cancers.

WHY THE CHANGE

Inadequate records from that period made it impossible to determine how much radiation individual workers were exposed to. Designation of these workers as a class simplifies the compensation process.

HOW THEY WERE EXPOSED

Brookhaven employees could have been exposed to radiation while working at or near the three nuclear research reactors that operated there during the period. Objects studied at the lab's reactors and particle accelerators are another possible source.

SOME OTHER SITES WHERE WORKERS HAVE BEEN

SIMILARLY DESIGNATED

Nevada Test Site, Los Alamos National Laboratory, Dow Chemical Company in Illinois.

SOURCES: Federal Department of Labor,

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Brookhaven National Laboratory

[< back to article](#)