

# Nuclear Weapons Workers Die Waiting for Care and Compensation

By Kelly Lundeen

This year marks the milestone commemorations of the devastating Trinity bomb test and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. By contrast, an anniversary to be celebrated is the 20 years since enactment of the Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program Act (EEOICPA) of 2000.

This is the program that has helped 126,000 nuclear and uranium workers access \$18 billion to date in much-deserved medical benefits and compensation for deaths and illnesses related to exposures to radiation and toxic substances while at work building the US nuclear arsenal.

The EEOICPA was brought into effect after nuclear workers at a uranium enrichment facility, the Paducah Gaseous Diffusion Plant, in Kentucky, filed a \$10 billion class-action lawsuit against federal government contractors. This is only one of the 350 nuclear weapons production, research and development sites and thousands of uranium mines and mills that have had former workers lining up to access the program.

Applying for benefits and compensation under EEOICPA is a complicated and long process. Today nearly 13,000 claims have been filed and are awaiting a decision while 96,000 claims have been denied.

Have you ever heard of this guy? “My name is Joe Harding,” he starts in a 1980 audio cassette memoir. “I am 58 years old. I have a story that I think everyone in America should know about. I heard about the atomic energy [Union Carbide] plant that was being built at Paducah, Kentucky...[it] seemed to be important and patriotic...I was 31 years old...I was strong and healthy and tough.”

Meet Clara Harding. “He began to have mutations from his joints, his fingers, toes, his angles, his elbows, his shoulder blades...Bone was actually growing through the flesh.”

## Majority Opinion: Eliminate the ICBMs

On Aug. 7, the Program for Public Consultation at the University of Maryland published a report of its survey of 86,000 people in the US.

The report, “Common Ground of the American People,” finds broad support for eliminating the remaining land-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) instead of replacing them. Majority approval of phasing out the ICBMs was 69% among Democrats; 53% among Republicans; and 61% overall.

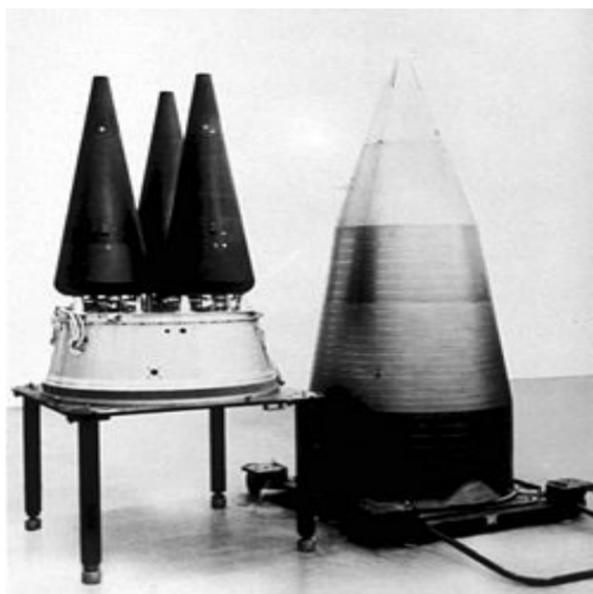
The elimination of the remaining 400 ICBMs, also known as Minuteman III missiles, and the cancellation of their planned replacement, would have a major impact on US nuclear weapons production.

The entire basis for the plans to restart the production of plutonium warhead cores, or “pits,” for new nuclear weapons, is to provide warheads (the W87-1) for the planned replacement missile known as the “Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent.”

The House of Representatives is now requesting a review of the W87-1 warhead program, including an independent assessment of options that don’t require new pits.

Altogether, the land-based missile program will cost over \$100 billion.

A number of military experts—including Gen. James Cartwright (Ret.), former STRATCOM commander under GW Bush and later Vice Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and former Secretary of Defense William Perry—have argued that national security would be improved by phasing out the ICBMs.



Nuclear warheads and their ICBM nose cone.

Joe described the mutations “like a piece of finger nail sticking through...I would trim it off ... and it would come back again.” That wasn’t all that was happening to him. He died of stomach cancer related to his 18 years at the plant.

Al Puckett was a union shop steward at the Paducah site. “They told us that stuff won’t hurt you ... if you ate it.” In 1999 a document was released proving that Union Carbide plant officials knew what was happening because they were tracking worker cancers and deaths. Puckett lamented, “A lot of my friends I know died from what they did. It was just like people was expendable.” Over \$1 billion has been paid to former Paducah workers through EEOICPA.

These days fewer workers are taking advantage of EEOICPA. Those working in uranium mining, milling and transport are only eligible if their exposure was prior to 1971, although groups like the Post-71 Uranium Workers Committee are working to change that.

The nuclear production, research and development workforce has decreased, although some effects of radiation exposure don’t usually appear until years later. Work site safety standards have improved as worker illness and death have cut into the bottom line of the corporations profiting from them.

Professional Case Management (PCM) is an organization that helps nuclear workers apply for benefits. PCM spokesperson Tim Lerew says some workers die waiting and that’s “not just an occasional occurrence, because a typical claim can be just a few months...but sometimes can drag into years.” Instead of covering medical costs when due, EEOICPA is only taking responsibility for compensation which Lerew translates into, “health care delayed is health care denied.”

PCM will mark the 20th anniversary on October 30, as it does every year, with a remembrance for those who paid with their health and sometimes their life working in the nuclear weapons complex.

See more at [coldwar patriots.org](http://coldwar patriots.org).

Public attitudes, polled nationwide, present no barrier to phasing out ICBMs. “This finding is highly noteworthy, as it runs in direct contrast to the Pentagon’s current plan of spending approximately \$100 billion to buy a brand-new generation of ICBMs by 2030,” reported Matt Korda in *Forbes* online, Aug. 12. “In reality, these costs are expected to rise, given that the contract will be sole-sourced to Northrop Grumman.

“Why is this \$100 billion project still moving forward?” Korda asked, then suggested an answer. “Northrop Grumman—the only bidder for the ICBM replacement contract—spent more than \$162 million on lobbying between 2008 and 2018, with the bulk of the contributions going to members of the “ICBM Caucus” [or “Doomsday Lobby”]—a coalition of Senators from states where ICBMs are deployed. In 2018, this lobbying effort helped kill an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act which called for a feasibility study on extending the life of the current ICBM force, rather than rebuilding it from scratch.”

The costly corporate arm-twisting has paid off. On Sept. 8, the Air Force awarded Northrop Grumman the first \$13.3 billion contract for the new missile system which, the *Washington Post* said, is in the long-run expected to be worth \$85 billion for the weapons giant.

—Greg Mello, director of the Los Alamos Study Group in Albuquerque, New Mexico contributed reporting for this story.



## EPA Law Enforcement Suspended Under Cover of Covid

By Christine Manwiller

In March 2020, the US Environmental Protection Agency suspended its enforcement of certain environmental laws, citing coronavirus risks. “EPA is committed to protecting human health and the environment, but recognizes [that] challenges resulting from efforts to protect workers and the public from Covid-19 may directly impact the ability of regulated facilities to meet all federal regulatory requirements,” EPA administrator Andrew Wheeler said in a press release. The ongoing rule suspension allows regulated industry to break EPA rules and regulations, if the violations can be linked to Covid-19. There was no end date set for the pollution holiday.

The move allows increases in air and water pollution, improper handling of fracking wastewater, and suspension of industrial reporting of greenhouse gas emissions. Former EPA officials were stunned, and predicted catastrophic consequences. Gina McCarthy, president and CEO of the Natural Resources Defense Council and former EPA Administrator, said, “This is an open license to pollute. The administration should be giving its all toward making our country healthier right now. Instead it is taking advantage of an unprecedented public health crisis to do favors for polluters that threaten public health.”

Last January Mr. Trump signed a repeal of water protections that had limited the pollution of drinking water sources for about one third of the country. Trump’s repeal allows farm and industrial wastes to pollute millions of miles of streams and about half of US wetlands.

The US Nuclear Regulatory Commission also issued risky pandemic rules that raise work-week caps from 72 to 84 hours, and pause reactor inspections for 18 months. Reactor refueling will continue uninterrupted, although some workers travel to small communities, potentially spreading Covid-19 infections. Beyond Nuclear’s Kevin Kamps called the action dangerous. “How inspections, repairs and replacements of safety-significant systems can go undone and not increase risk, has not been adequately explained by the NRC.”

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