

Seeking Nuclear Justice: Voices from the Marshallese Diaspora in Arkansas

By Benetick Kabua Maddison, and the Marshallese Educational Initiative team

This year marks the expiration of the Compact of Free Association, an agreement between the United States and Marshall Islands governments originally signed in 1986, in part to mitigate the damages from U.S. nuclear weapons testing. The United States conducted 67 high-yield nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands from 1946-1958, the biological, ecological, and cultural consequences of which are ongoing.

My homelands, which were characterized as tiny and scattered islands with a small, expendable population when lands were needed for nuclear tests for the “good of mankind” and for “world peace,” now looms large in U.S. national security interests in the Pacific, due to the perceived threat of China. Marshallese leaders want the Biden Administration to fairly address the nuclear legacy. It appears the administration is willing to do so. They should.

The Marshall Islands needs well-funded medical facilities with cancer specialists and educational facilities that can accommodate trained teachers until we can produce our own, along with scholarships for our youth seeking higher education, and improvements to infrastructure and communications. Addressing the needs and well-being of the Marshallese people was promised under the Trust Territory of the Pacific framework, an agreement that the U.S. government forged under the United Nations from 1947 to 1986, but never came to fruition. Under a new compact and with a Biden Administration committed to equity and justice, the United States must do better.

And what of Marshallese who have already left the islands seeking access to healthcare, education, and employment? Those of us in diaspora now make up two-thirds of the Marshallese population. How can both sides say they are committed to nuclear justice and yet not address the needs of the Marshallese in the United States?



“... for the good of mankind,” by Marshallese artist Marino Morris. U.S. military authorities who commandeered the Marshall Islands in 1946 and targeted them with over 60 nuclear bomb blasts, declared to the Indigenous Marshallese inhabitants that the destruction of their islands was being done, “for the good of mankind.”

The nuclear weapons testing legacy — the driving force behind migration and the need for a compact — has taken its toll on all Marshallese people. The ongoing consequences of the nuclear legacy, including its impact on Marshallese bodies and culture, recognizes no geopolitical boundaries.

In the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, Marshallese living in the United States were among the hardest hit of all ethnic groups. In Northwest Arkansas, where the highest concentration of

away by new legislation, sometimes purposeful, sometimes not. However, Medicaid was finally restored in December 2020. Most Marshallese remain without healthcare and are vulnerable.

What Marshallese qualify for under the full Compact of Free Association is unknown not just to most U.S. citizens, but to federal officials whose responsibility it is to make decisions on Marshallese eligibility. There are still issues with Medicaid enrollment, and there is confusion among U.S. officials regarding the correct documentation needed for entering and working in the United States, while interpretations of what federal financial aid Marshallese students qualify for differ from state to state.

Under the current Compact, the United States continues to designate the nuclear-affected as only those from the atolls in which the tests took place, Bikini and Enewetak, and the two atolls that received the heaviest fallout from the 1954 Castle Bravo detonation, Rongelap and Utrök. However, according to witnesses and the U.S. government’s own documents released in the 1990s, contamination was much more widespread.

Marshallese government officials made this case to the United States in 2000 when it submitted a Changed Circumstances Petition that included evidence from newly released U.S. documents that confirm the contamination. The George W. Bush White House and Congress rejected that petition. Will this administration do better in the cause for nuclear justice?

Many of our families have migrated and continue to migrate in increasing numbers, now more and more due to climate change. For my family and all Marshallese families living in diaspora in Arkansas and across the United States, whose lands, bodies, and culture were sacrificed, we ask to be heard, to be seen, and to be treated fairly.

—Benetick Kabua Maddison, Executive Director of the Marshallese Educational Initiative. Contact: info@mei.ngo. For more on nuclear testing history, visit www.mei.ngo/nuclear.

Marshallese reside in the continental United States, we make up 3% of the population, but accounted for 40% of the deaths due to Covid-19 in the early summer. Part of our vulnerability was due to underlying health conditions — cancer and diabetes — that are a direct result of U.S. post-war occupation and the weapons testing legacy.

Most public benefits that were a part of the original compact have been removed over the years, chipped

Holtec Dump Plans

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In New York, State Senator Pete Harcham and Assemblywoman Dana Levenberg introduced legislation that makes it unlawful to release any radiological agents into the Hudson River during decommissioning of nuclear reactors, and failure to comply shall result in fines. The “Save the Hudson” bill passed the state senate unanimously, and activists are calling on the Assembly to call a special session to do the same after it initially failed June 10.

In early April, U.S. Senators Chuck Schumer and Kirsten Gillibrand wrote to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission expressing “significant concerns” regarding Holtec’s planned discharge of large amounts of radioactive wastewater from Indian Point. The NRC dismissed their concerns in a letter that states “to date, all releases at Indian Point have been a small fraction of the allowable limits for such releases.”

As of early May, more than two dozen municipal resolutions were adopted in New York, with more pending, to stop Holtec’s dumping plans. On May 6, 2023, the Save the River Rally at Cortlandt Waterfront Park was organized by the town of Cortlandt. Hundreds of local residents, kayakers, environmental activists, and public elected officials participated to demand the dumping be halted. They are calling for keeping the waste contained onsite.

— Arjun Makhijani, *Exploring Tritium Dangers: Health and Ecosystem Risks of Internally Incorporated Radionuclides*, 2023; Beyond Nuclear report “Leak First, Fix Later,” April 2010.

— For more info., or to get involved, see: *Food & Water Watch*, www.foodandwaterwatch.org

— Mari Inoue, a lawyer and activist based in New York City, was born and raised in Tokyo, and is co-founder of Manhattan Project for a Nuclear-Free World (mp-nuclear-free.com).

Decades of Radioactive Dumping Tied to Cancers at Coldwater Creek

DOE and Army Corps accused of negligence over St. Louis radioactive waste

By Bob Mayberry

Last year the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers declined to test for radioactive contamination inside the Jane Elementary School in northern St. Louis, in spite of considerable community pressure to do so. Outside testing eventually revealed levels of contamination 22 times higher than background levels in the playground, and 12 times higher than average inside the gymnasium. The school was closed and local lawmakers persuaded the Corps to conduct new tests.

But it was not until early this year that the Department of Energy (DOE) finally requested permission to test for contamination along Coldwater Creek, and even then only at one site, the historic Fort Belle Fontaine, the first U.S. military installation west of the Missouri River. Meanwhile, reports of disease and incidences of cancer at several sites along the creek continue to surface, and residents complain that federal agencies do not communicate about the dangers in the area.

Jane Elementary School sits adjacent to Coldwater Creek, which runs 19 miles between the St. Louis airport and the Missouri River. In 2014, state health officials reported higher incidences of rare cancers associated with low-dose radioactive exposure in areas adjacent to the creek. In 2016, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended residents avoid getting into or playing near the creek, and in 2019 the federal Department of Health and Human Services released a report concluding that “Radiological contamination in and around Coldwater Creek ... could have increased the risk of some types of cancer in people who played or lived there.”

In early March, the Missouri House of Representatives heard testimony about compensation for St. Louis area residents exposed to radioactive waste. State Representative Tricia Byrnes accused the DOE of negligence for failing to remove “the considerable amount of waste around the region.”

The problems began during World War II when the Mallinckrodt Chemical Company began to secretly process uranium ore north of downtown St. Louis as part of the Manhattan Project. Radioactive by-products were first stored on the St. Louis airport’s northern edge, adjacent to Coldwater Creek, then later trucked to sites further east along the creek, including a site near where the Jane Elementary School now sits. Mallinckrodt officials dismissed the dangers of radioactive waste in a 1946 statement to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, claiming the waste materials “were not radioactive and not dangerous.”

Though processing of uranium by Mallinckrodt Co. ended in 1957, radioactive and chemical waste materials continued to be shipped to and from sites in and around St. Louis. Between 1957 and 1966, uranium ore was processed near Weldon Spring, west of Coldwater Creek along the Missouri River. Approximately 1.5 million cubic yards of radioactive and chemical waste were piled 75 feet high along Route 94 South, near another St. Louis public school. In 1973, nearly 8,700 tons of barium sulfate waste from the Coldwater Creek area was mixed with 40,000 tons of topsoil and shipped to a landfill in Weldon Spring. Residents claim not to have been notified about any of these dangerous practices.

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