

RILED ABOUT RECA

Voices needed to propel RECA to Congress before clock runs out

By Kathy Helms, August 24, 2018
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GRANTS — More than 100 people poured into the former Cibola County Complex this past Saturday, hoping for word that Congress is ready to amend the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act. Unfortunately, Congress is not to that point yet.

But those who worked in the uranium industry after Dec. 30, 1971, and were excluded from receiving compensation because the United States was no longer the sole purchaser of uranium, are closer to having Congress consider the bill than they have been in a decade. And if not this year, then maybe the next. But even that option is scheduled to go away in 2020.

Susan Gordon, of the Multicultural Alliance for a Safe Environment, said that after Uranium Workers Day at the New Mexico Legislature in 2017, they started a campaign to raise the visibility of the RECA amendments.

More than 7,000 postcards were sent to the office of Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee. “That’s where the RECA amendments have been sitting for like 10 years,” Gordon said.



Marlene Johnson of Laguna Pueblo, who suffers from pulmonary fibrosis, takes notes during Saturday's Post '71 Uranium Workers Committee meeting in Grants.
Kathy Helms/Independent



Linda Evers, co-chair of the Post '71 Uranium Workers Committee, reported on a June trip to Washington where packets filled with the testimonies of former uranium workers were presented to the Senate Judiciary Committee.
Kathy Helms/Independent

“As a result of that, last year they scheduled two oversight hearings. Those oversight hearings are not actually considering the bill itself, but they’re educational opportunities. They both were canceled at the last minute,” she said. “At that point Congress was debating whether or not to shut the government down, so shutting the government down took precedence over our RECA hearing. But it was rescheduled again for June of this year.”

Slow but sure

On the Monday before the June 27 hearing, Gordon said, they delivered binders to every member of the Senate Judiciary Committee and also to the New Mexico delegation. When the hearing occurred, Navajo Nation Vice President Jonathan Nez and U.S. Sen. Tom Udall, D-N.M., spoke on behalf of the uranium workers.

“One of the things about this hearing is it was going to be focused exclusively on downwinders, and that was because the hearing was put forward by Senator (Mike) Crapo from Idaho,” Gordon said. “They don’t have a lot of uranium miners up there, but they have a lot of downwind communities from these above-ground nuclear weapons explosions.”

The Post '71 Uranium Workers Committee and MASE did another postcard campaign, and in a very short period of time, another 500 postcards were sent to Crapo’s office in Idaho rather than his D.C. office. Through that campaign and the efforts of others, including New Mexico’s congressional delegation, the Senate committee decided to include the uranium workers in the hearing, although they were not allowed to present oral testimony.

“This is progress,” Gordon said. “We know it’s slow, we know it’s tough, but we’re going to keep at it.”

The Post '71 Uranium Workers Committee will provide a public update, 10 a.m.-1 p.m. Saturday at Wowie’s Event Center in Trademark Square Plaza, 1500 S. 2nd St., Suite 4, Gallup.

Lobbying Congress

Linda Evers, co-chair of the Post '71 Uranium Workers Committee, attended the June 27 Senate oversight hearing along with Larry King, of Churchrock.

They met with members of the Navajo Nation Washington Office the afternoon before the hearing. "We thought we were going to get the standard 15 to 30 minute meeting. We actually met with them for two hours," Evers said. "They had several suggestions, one of them being (to send) a single letter with a lot of signatures, so we took that up by the horns and we're running with that."

Gordon contacted other political offices and tried to set up appointments, without much luck.

"When we didn't get any other confirmations, we just took our information packets and went up to the Hill. We went around from office to office," Evers said, passing out information packets and requesting support and co-sponsorship on the bill. Before the day was over, they had run out of information packets.

The morning of the hearing politicians came and went. "After the meeting was over, Sen. Cory Booker from New Jersey signed on right then," Evers said.

"Michelle Lujan Grisham showed up as the meeting was over and Larry and I both spoke to her. We had heard from her office staff that RECA wasn't a priority to her, so Larry and I went straight to her and told her the rumors that were going around town," Evers said. "She assured us that she not only supported them, she fully supported the RECA amendments, and she requested the additional information that we had as well."

Rep. Ben Ray Luján, D-N.M., sent a request for a hearing on the companion House bill the day of the Senate hearing. Since then, he's sent out two more requests and has another one ready to go, Evers said. She and co-chair Liz Lucero are collecting signatures to send with a letter to the House in support of Luján's efforts to get a hearing.

The House bill sits in front of the Constitution and Civil Justice Subcommittee. Evers said Luján's Deputy Press Secretary Graham Mason guided them in making their letters politically correct so their signatures count. The Post '71 committee also followed suit with a Senate letter.

"We need you guys to put your signatures on the signature pages. If you have family and friends that can sign on, please take the signature page with you and have them sign on," Evers told the audience. The mission is to try to get as many signatures gathered as possible and send them to Washington by Sept. 5 when Congress is back in session.

On the advice of Luján's office, they also are signing up businesses and organizations in support of the RECA amendments. "Sometimes a lot of people make a difference, but sometimes organizations that support you make a difference too. So if you know anybody that's a business owner, that can speak for a business, have them get a hold of me," Evers said.

Trade-offs

Earlier this year, the House unanimously accepted an amendment Luján offered to the National Defense Authorization Act that expresses the "Sense of Congress" that the U.S. government should compensate all uranium workers, downwinders, and others suffering from the effects of uranium mining and nuclear testing carried out during the Cold War.

“Actually the whole Congress supported this ‘Sense of Congress,’” Evers said. “So Congress is on board wholeheartedly to support our amendments if we can just get them there.”

Askhay Sood, M.D., the B reader for the RECA program, did a research project at the University of New Mexico-Albuquerque comparing pre- and post-’71 workers. “In his abstract, he states clearly that the post ’71 workers should be included in the amendments because we not only have the same diseases, but we have more, and weird diseases,” Evers said.

The study has been under peer review the past nine months and is expected to become available around the first of the year. Evers said Sood is willing to go to Washington and explain to the politicians why his research is so important to post ’71 uranium workers.

Now that the Senate bill has made it through the committee hearing, it is ready for markup, which means the bill goes before another committee where trade-offs are negotiated. Evers said the Post ’71 committee is willing to give up the health impact study, which would cost millions, to reduce the estimated \$17 billion price tag of the amendments.

“Everybody knows that radiation makes human beings sick and kills them, so we don’t need to spend millions of dollars on a health impact study just to discover what we know for a fact – and we have Dr. Sood’s report coming out,” she said.

The amendments also call for including complete states in the downwinder program. “That’s going to be an amazing amount of money and they’re just not going to do it. So we asked if they could make it site-specific,” she said. “I don’t know what else the politicians are thinking about, but those are the two things that we conceded.”

Evers said she learned last week that if they can get the House bill through its hearing – even if the bills die in December – when they get reintroduced next year, the politicians can appeal to the chairmen and possibly bump them back up to the markup stage. “That’s why we’re trying to get Luján all the support he can get, to get his bills to a hearing,” she said. **Information:**
Linda Evers, 505-287-2304



Duane Overstreet, left, Randal Thomas, Leslie Begay and Tomas Tovar asked to have their picture taken in hope that Congress will see it and listen to them when they say their health was harmed from working in the uranium mining industry after 1971.
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