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Suffering Effects of 50's A-Bomb Tests

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"What we need now," Ms. Garman said in a telephone interview, "is to get public hearings in Idaho. We need our politicians to be our watchdogs. We're too sick, and we're not all going to be there when this happens."

Critics say that Governor Kempthorne and other officials, after initially expressing concern, have ignored the public health threat to Idaho residents. Nuclear watchdog groups have also questioned whether the officials' reluctance to press the issue was intended to protect Idaho's nuclear power industry, a major employer in the state, or because they supported the idea of resuming nuclear testing, as was proposed in a Pentagon report in 2002. State officials denied such motivations.

The controversy prompted Mr. Kempthorne and Senator Larry E. Craig, both Republicans, to take the unusual step of defending themselves two weeks ago on the editorial pages of the state's largest newspaper, The Idaho Statesman.

The governor, in an article published on Aug. 18, said, "I urge anyone with a



Melanie Conner for The New York Times
A native of Emmett, Idaho, with cancer, Sheri Garman, 52, raised the concern about radioactive fallout.

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story to tell to come forward."

But he also cited a 1998 study by the Cancer Data Registry of Idaho that found an increasing rate of thyroid cancer in Blaine and Custer Counties, but was unable to attribute the rising rates to a specific cause.

Asked why the governor had waited until now to urge Idaho residents to come forward if they suspected fallout had made them sick, a spokesman for Mr. Kempthorne, Mike Journee, said that the governor was waiting for concrete proof. He said the governor would support compensation for Idahoans if there were evidence "comparable to the evidence that was used to compensate folks in Utah."

Yet when the compensation program was amended in 2000 at the urging of Senator Orrin G. Hatch of Utah to include more counties in his state and in Arizona, Utah officials had the same scientific information- the 1997 Cancer Institute study - available to them as Idaho officials did. Utah officials cited testimony of residents from Utah and Arizona that was made available to Mr. Hatch's office as a rationale for including five more counties in those two states.

Senator Hatch, a Republican, wrote the original 1990 law that mandated compensation, known as the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act; the payments are administered by the Justice Department.

Mr. Journee said that Utah residents had been more vocal about their illnesses than Idahoans had.

"They were engaged," he said. "The reason folks down in Utah got compensation is that they told their stories. That's what the governor wants the people of Idaho to do."

[On Friday, Mr. Kempthorne wrote in a letter to the National Academy of Sciences board studying the issue, "I call upon the board to compare exposure information for Idaho with the areas currently included" in the compensation program. "Fairness," he wrote, "must recognize the human faces behind cold, and often inconclusive studies and statistics."]

The New York Times

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Jeff T. Green for The New York Times

"Somebody needs to own up to the fact that they messed up," said Richard Rynearson, 62, of Emmett, who is dying of cancer.

Here in Emmett, residents have spent the last several days making lists of relatives and neighbors - living and dead - with cancer. They have rushed to a local bakery, aptly named the Rumor Mill, where the owner, Tona Henderson, has produced a form letter of her own that residents can fill out and send to the National Academy of Sciences.

A committee of the academy is taking public comment for a study on nuclear fallout and public health to be submitted to the Department of Health and Human Services, said Bill Kearney, a spokesman for the academy. While many scientists and medical experts have said there is a connection between exposure to Iodine-131 and greater risk of thyroid disease and thyroid cancer, a link between the fallout and other diseases has not been established.

Still, in Emmett, dozens of residents have gathered in coffee shops and farmhouses to talk about cancer. Many furiously said they suspected their radiation exposure was connected to their cancers.

"This whole thing is wrong," said Richard Rynearson, 62, who is dying of colon and liver cancer, and who ran a heating and air-conditioning business until he became too sick to work. "Somebody needs to own up to the fact that they messed up."

Mr. Rynearson, who recalled seeing that strange gray dust on the dairy farm where he grew up, said he first learned of the nuclear fallout last week.

"I always thought maybe there was something wrong in this valley," he said. "But I would have liked to have known 10 years ago if we had this problem. Maybe I could have gotten checked out."

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