

THE BUFFALO NEWS

RADIATION AFTERMATH

Bethlehem Steel site profile being revised, claimants told

By JANICE L. HABUDA and JOHN F. BONFATTI
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A site profile of Bethlehem Steel will be revised to determine compensation for people who suffered radiation-related cancers after working on federal atomic weapons programs, a federal official said Wednesday night in Cheektowaga.

A standing-room-only crowd filled two banquet rooms of the Sheraton Four Points Hotel for a public meeting called by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.

The compensation program followed the federal government's admission, after years of denial, that employees of more than 300 private companies across the country were exposed to radiation from uranium when they worked in secret developing the U.S. nuclear arsenal during the Cold War. Bethlehem Steel was the largest employer of the 13 area sites included in the program.

An independent audit of the criteria used to estimate workers' exposure has prompted the Advisory Board on Radiation and Worker Health, appointed by the president, to advise NIOSH to review the auditor's findings and observations - the former being more important than the latter, said Dr. Paul L. Ziemer, advisory board chairman.

"The board hasn't taken a position as to (whether) the items are valid," Ziemer said.

James W. Neton, from NIOSH's Office of Compensation Analysis and Support, said Wednesday night that the two sets of scientific opinions will be merged and a revised profile issued early next month.

The site profile is crucial to claimants because it is used to help decide whether there was at least a 50 percent

likelihood that a claimant's cancer was caused by radiation exposure. There is no compensation if it is decided that the likelihood is less than 50 percent.

Workers who fit the criteria, or their survivors, are eligible for lump sum payments of \$150,000, as well as payment of certain medical expenses.

Claimants criticized the use of air sampling data taken from another local plant, Simonds Saw and Steel of Lockport, in the Bethlehem Steel model.

At another meeting earlier Wednesday to discuss the audit, the Rev. Jerome Livingston, pursuing a claim on behalf of his father-in-law, called the use of data from a different plant "pseudo-science. You're trying to re-create a situation you can't re-create," he said.

But John Mauro of Sanford Cohen and Associates, the independent firm that audited the site profile, said he believes the substitution was appropriate.

"I believe that by using the Simonds Saw data, as it was expanded, you can reconstruct the dose," he said. "The approach taken by NIOSH is claimant-favorable for most workers," he said. "However, I don't believe it's favorable to some workers."

Specifically, Mauro said the profile may underestimate the radiation dose workers who were closely involved with the uranium rolling would have received.

Neton talked about uranium exposure - the major workplace hazard coming from inhalation - and how it figured in the profile.

"When you breathe uranium it gives you more radiation dose than any other way," he said. "If you breathe uranium in, the lungs, of course, would be irradiated." As a result, cancers of the lung have a high probability of exposure causation, followed by liver, kidneys and skin. Less probability went to cancers of the pancreas, bladder and spleen.

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At the meeting earlier Wednesday, former Bethlehem Steel employee Edwin Walker had a question for officials.

"How can we believe you people now when we've been lied to for 50 years?" he asked.

Local claimants like Walker say the program has been poorly executed, and has a number of flaws which have resulted in fewer people receiving the benefit.

"This is a travesty," said Donald B. Allen, pursuing a claim on behalf of his father. "I'm not hearing anything different from what I've been hearing before."

"For four years, we've been monkeying around," said Walker, one of the founders of the Bethlehem Steel Action Group, an umbrella group of claimants. "A lot of the claimants we had have died."

Wednesday night Walker said: "We don't have another four years to decide whether the audit is right or NIOSH is right."

Arthur J. Sambuchi, who's been involved in the claim process since 2001, expressed similar frustration about the amount of time that has passed.

"There are so many unanswered questions," Sambuchi said. "This may be the last meeting I ever go to because I'm not going to waste my time anymore."

email: jbonfatti@buffnews.com

e-mail: jhabuda@buffnews.com

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