

# science & TECHNOLOGY

THE BATTALION

## Workers exposed to dangerous waste

### Government, private companies covered up health risks during WWII

ARLINGTON, Va. (AP) — Government records filed away for decades document how the U.S. government used hundreds of private companies during the 1940s and 1950s to handle dangerous materials used to make nuclear weapons, exposing thousands of workers to potential health risks, USA Today reported.

A White House panel — the President's Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments — was set up in 1994 to investigate health risks from various secret Cold War studies and other government inquiries have focused on risks to workers — public and private — who handled nuclear material.

While some of the most dramatic cases involving private companies have been written about previously, USA Today said it has documented for the first time the scope of the programs.

In a series of three stories beginning in Wednesday's editions, the paper reports on material gleaned from a review of 100,000 pages of government records, many of which it said were only recently declassified.

Reporters visited archives and former contracting sites in 10 states and interviewed scores of former employees, neighbors and government officials.

They found the government relied on a vast network of private plants, mills and shops to build the early U.S. nuclear arsenal, with grave health and environmental consequences for thousands of workers and dozens of communities.

Energy Secretary Bill Richardson told the paper he was "receptive" to the idea of developing a government database for all of the sites that can be shared with the public and said, "the administration will continue to be aggressive, in efforts to obtain compensation for workers harmed in the

various nuclear programs."

Among the major findings of the USA Today review:

—The government hired about 300 private companies during World War II to process and produce material used in nuclear weapons production, with at least a third of them handling large amounts of radioactive and toxic material even if they did not have the proper equipment or knowledge to protect workers.

—The government regularly documented worker health risks at many private facilities, producing highly classified reports that detailed radiation exposure rates hundreds of times above safety standards.

—Many private companies contaminated the surrounding air, soil and water with toxic and radioactive waste.

—Both the government and private executives at the companies hid health and environmental problems.

#### Science in Brief

### A&M prof discusses plate theories

A few days ago many northern Californians were subject to an earthquake which measured 5.2 on the Richter scale. Although there are earthquakes occurring daily, very there have been very few occurring on the Atlantic shore.

Some of these earthquakes are powerful enough to cause tsunamis which are massive walls of water that seep across oceans and can devastate coastal regions.

Tom Hilde, a professor of geophysics at Texas A&M and an expert in plate tectonics, said that one should not be expected any time soon.

A computer model recently developed at Pennsylvania State University hypothesized that high pressure subseafloor water pockets which were approximately 100 miles off the New Jersey coast could trigger landslides along the edge of continental shelf, possibly resulting in destructive waves.

In a press release, Hilde said that the entire western margin of the Pacific Ocean is bordered by convergent plate margins.

"In contrast, the Atlantic margin of the United States is a passive margin, not a plate boundary, and so it is not tectonically active," he said.

### Cure for Alzheimers may be on the way

A Canadian research team has isolated a protein responsible for the degeneration of nerve cells in Alzheimer's disease, called nicastrin.

Dr. Paul Fraser of the Centre for Research in Neurodegenerative Diseases said nicastrin is an important component of the cellular machinery underlying Alzheimer's and has several features which suggest that it might be used as a target for the development of new drugs for this disease.

The protein is named after a small southern Italian village called Nicastrò which played a critical role in the discovery of genes that cause early forms of Alzheimers.

## Insects inhabiting caves may be endangered

SAN ANTONIO (AP) — Federal listing of cave-dwelling insects as endangered species could bar the development of land around their habitat, reining in some of what has been rapid real estate development, officials say.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service next month is scheduled to review whether to designate the nine spiders, beetles and bugs that dwell exclusively in northern Bexar County caves as endangered.

That would mean that developers and landowners may be prevented from developing a minimum of 60 acres around each cave to ensure their survival.

The tiny critters are known to inhabit at least 55 caves, according to the San Antonio Express-News' editions Wednesday.

"We're talking about cave invertebrates that are about as big as the 'L' on the dime in the word 'Liberty,'" said Gene Dawson Jr., an engineer who tried to negotiate a voluntary agreement among property owners who have caves with one or more of the nine species.

"That's how big these species are they're trying to protect," Dawson said. "That little species could prevent a highway from going in or a residential subdivision or a retail development."

Local and state groups petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Service to protect the bugs more than eight years ago, when they feared that San Antonio's expansion to the north was threatening the insects. When the Tucson,

**"It's absurd that someone has to threaten the federal government to enforce their own regulations."**

— Kyle Cunningham  
Co-Chair Helotes Creek association

Ariz.-based Center for Biological Diversity threatened a lawsuit in May, the federal agency promised to take action.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will issue its opinion on the Bexar County bugs by Oct. 18, according to its letter dated Aug. 31.

Peter Galvin, conservation biologist for the Center for Biological Diversity, said the agency will sue if the Bexar County insects aren't declared endangered or if there is any additional delay.

A hydrogeologist and cave explorer whose research has been used by environmental groups and USFWS said as many as a dozen caves that may have contained one or more of the

species have been destroyed since 1992.

The researcher, George Veni, said "the area over the recharge zone and where the caves are located is under siege," with caves being paved over or contaminated by pesticides.

Kyle Cunningham, co-chairwoman of one of the five organizations that filed the original petition in January 1992, expressed frustration that the insects are not already listed as endangered.

"I find the whole thing absurd," said Cunningham, with the Helotes Creek Association.

"It's absurd to that someone has to threaten the federal government basically to enforce their own regulations."

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