

U.S. SENATOR MIKE DEWINE (R-OH)

Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs

Hearing: Health and Safety Issues at Department of Energy's Gaseous Diffusion Plants in Oak Ridge, Tennessee and Piketon, Ohio

March 22, 2000

[Statement Submitted for the Record]

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Lieberman, let me first express my appreciation to you for holding this oversight hearing. I believe it is important to the people of Piketon, Ohio, to know what material the employees of the Portsmouth Gaseous Diffusion Plant were exposed to, why no one has provided complete and accurate information on the health and safety risks associated with working in the Plant, and what progress the Department of Energy is making in providing answers to the community.

Back in August, I was very troubled to learn that plutonium-laced uranium went through the Portsmouth facility. Just as troubling, the Department of Energy was learning about this issue from its own reports. The Department has now had several months to investigate, and I still have questions. For instance, I am troubled that the Department has not responded to a February 15th letter from Senator Voinovich, Representative Strickland and myself that asked whether or not the Department's oversight team would be able to include information on the health and safety risks from weapons system material -- if any was ever sent to Portsmouth -- in its final oversight report. The fact that there are still unanswered questions on the material that went through the Portsmouth facility may mean that the Department could downplay the health and safety risks to past and present workers.

While I understand that secrecy was necessary throughout the 50's, 60's, and 70's during the Cold War, I believe that the Department needs to move forward and make information known that is important to protect worker health and safety. After all, the health and safety of the workforce should be one of our top priorities. As I hope to show at a field hearing later this year, the Federal Government permitted workers at the Portsmouth plant and other nuclear facilities to be at risk of exposure. These men and women who made their contribution to this country's national defense have suffered not only from the illnesses that they contracted as a result of the risk that the government placed them in, but also from the systems set up to compensate these workers for job-related injuries. The Administration has a proposal to compensate a very limited number of Department of Energy contract workers whose health was put at risk; and while I support that effort, I believe that this proposal does not go far enough. It does not include the thousands of Portsmouth employees who were exposed to radioactive and other hazardous materials without adequate protection, and I am committed to ensuring that Ohio workers are treated fairly.

Again, I appreciate the Chairman's interest in an issue that is of great importance to families of the workers in our states. These families continue to have questions and they deserve straight answers. I hope this hearing will give us an opportunity to do just that.

