

**Opening Statement of
Chairman Fred Thompson
Senate Governmental Affairs Committee
March 22, 2000**

Good morning. I want to first welcome all of those who have come from Oak Ridge, Tennessee and Piketon, Ohio to attend this hearing. We certainly appreciate you traveling all this way to be here. I know this issue is very important to you, and to many others at both sites who could not be here today.

We are here this morning to discuss one of the more unseemly aspects of the Cold War: the possibility that the federal government put workers at its nuclear weapons plants in harm's way without their knowledge.

I have been concerned about this issue for some time, since I started hearing from current and former workers in the Oak Ridge area about a pattern of unexplained illnesses that many believed were related to their service at the Department of Energy site. In 1997, I asked then-Director of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to send a team to Oak Ridge to assess the situation and to try to determine if what we were seeing there was truly unique. Unfortunately, in the end, the CDC did not take a broad enough look at the situation to really answer the questions that had been raised.

And that, of course, has been a pattern at Oak Ridge and at many of these DOE sites over the years. Studies have been done, some on very narrow populations and some on larger ones, some apparently showing some correlations and some not able to reach any conclusions at all. The data is mixed, some of it is flawed, and we are left with a situation that is confusing and from which it is very difficult to draw any definite conclusions.

And yet, there is a growing realization that there are illnesses among current and former DOE workers that logic tells us are probably related to their service at these weapons sites. For example, approximately 150 current and former workers in the DOE complex have been diagnosed with Chronic Beryllium Disease. Many more have so-called "beryllium sensitivity," which often develops into Chronic Beryllium Disease. The only way to contract either of these conditions is to be exposed to beryllium powder. The only entities that use beryllium in that form are the Department of Energy and the Department of Defense.

And there are other examples, perhaps less clear cut, but certainly worthy of concern. Uranium, plutonium, and a variety of heavy metals found in people's bodies. Anecdotes about hazardous working conditions where people were unprotected both against exposures they knew were there and exposures of which they were not aware. It's time for the federal government to stop automatically denying any responsibility and face up to the fact that it appears as though it made at least some people sick. The question now is: what do we do about it? And how do we make sure it never happens again?

I want to say that I believe the Department of Energy, and especially Dr. Michaels, who will be testifying here this morning, have taken important steps forward in this regard. Rather than continuing to deny any linkage, they have said that if the Department made people sick, then we should compensate them for it. I look forward to working with the Department, and with the Oak Ridge community, and with my colleagues in the Senate to determine the best and fairest way to accomplish that goal.

In the end, we must remember that these workers were helping to defend our nation and protect our security. They were patriotic and proud of the work they were doing. If the federal government made mistakes that jeopardized their health and safety, then we need to do what we can to make it right. A great country can do nothing less.

Thank you.