



Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA)

The [Radiation Exposure Compensation Act](#) (RECA), enacted in 1990, provides financial compensation to individuals who suffered specific health conditions due to radiation exposure. This exposure resulted from atmospheric nuclear testing or employment in the nuclear weapons production industry during the Cold War. Since its inception, the program has awarded more than \$2.5 billion to more than 39,000 claimants across the American Southwest, including “Downwinders” in Utah, Nevada and Arizona, and uranium workers across the Four Corners region.

History

RECA’s origins lie in the devastating health impacts experienced by workers and communities near nuclear test sites and uranium mines during the mid-20th century. Between 1945 and 1962, the United States conducted atmospheric nuclear tests, primarily at the Nevada Test Site in Nye County, Nevada, exposing nearby residents, military personnel, and uranium industry workers to harmful levels of radiation. These exposures caused a range of health problems, including cancers and chronic illnesses.

Key Milestones

- *Early advocacy:* Grassroots movements in affected communities, such as the Downwinders in Nevada, Utah and Arizona, brought national attention to the health consequences of radiation exposure. Activists and scientists highlighted the federal government’s role in exposing individuals to radiation during nuclear weapons development.
- *1980s studies:* Congressional hearings and studies during the 1980s confirmed the link between radiation exposure and health problems. Lawmakers recognized the need for federal compensation to acknowledge the government’s role and support affected individuals.
- *Enactment (1990):* President George H.W. Bush signed RECA into law on October 15, 1990, creating a framework to compensate three main groups: onsite participants in nuclear testing, downwinders living near test sites and uranium workers employed in mining, milling or ore transportation.
- *Subsequent amendments:* Over the years, Congress expanded RECA to include additional diseases, geographic regions and uranium workers that were originally excluded from the program. To address complaints over the slow and burdensome claims process, the program was significantly revised in 2000 to broaden eligibility and streamline claims.
- *Extension of filing deadlines:* The filing deadline was initially set for 2000 but was extended multiple times. Most recently, [Public Law 117-139](#) extended the program to June 10, 2024.

Eligibility Categories and Compensation Amounts

- Onsite Participants
 - Who qualifies: Individuals who participated onsite in atmospheric nuclear testing and later developed specified cancers.
 - Compensation: \$75,000
- Downwinders
 - Who qualifies: Residents of designated areas near the Nevada Test Site who were exposed to fallout during periods of nuclear testing and developed specified diseases.
 - Compensation: \$50,000
- Uranium Workers
 - Who qualifies: Miners, millers and ore transporters who worked in the uranium industry from 1942 to 1971 and later developed specific diseases.

- Compensation: \$100,000

RECA acknowledges the severe and often unanticipated health and environmental consequences of the United States' nuclear weapons program. RECA is a [federal effort](#) to:

- **Recognize the unintended harm caused by government actions:** Early studies and public information did not fully reveal the dangers of radiation exposure. RECA acknowledges that those affected were not aware of the long-term dangers posed by their work or residence near nuclear facilities.
- **Provide financial relief to impacted individuals:** Compensation helps address the devastating health consequences faced by claimants who developed serious illnesses through no fault of their own.
- **Preserve the legacy of affected communities:** By documenting and compensating for these harms, RECA ensures that the experiences of these individuals are not forgotten and serves as a reminder of the importance of transparency and accountability in public health policy.

Current Status

S.3853, the [Radiation Exposure Compensation Reauthorization](#) Act, would extend RECA for six years. It would also [extend](#) the period for filing claims, increase compensation for claimants and add downwinder eligibility for a number of previously unacknowledged communities in the West and Southwest.

S.3853 passed in the Senate on March 7, 2024, with a vote of 69-30. It has yet to be voted on in the House.