

REPORT ON ACTIONS TAKEN IN GAO REPORT, PSAD-79-54,
MAY 8, 1979, "ENEWETAK ATOLL--CLEANING UP NUCLEAR CONTAMINATION"
ADDRESSED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Recommendations and Comments

I. Need to consider compensation for lost land or lost land usage as a result of nuclear tests

A Task Force established by the Office for Micronesian Status Negotiations is examining this issue and until a final report and recommendations are available, comment is withheld.

II. Loss of copra "cash crop"

The Master Plan for the Enewetak Rehabilitation called for the planting of 14,000 coconut trees in certain of the northeastern islands of Enewetak Atoll. The planting of the northern islands was primarily for copra production and was to be a major source of future revenue for the people of Enewetak.

The GAO report notes that the planting of coconuts on these northeastern islands has been delayed because of the Bikini experience and is now awaiting results of a new soil analysis of the northern islands. A new survey commenced in March 1979, and preliminary results are expected to be available in mid-July. The Department of the Interior hopes that the July test results will enable a decision to be made as to the timing of the planting of the islands in question.

The GAO report additionally points out that should the cash crop copra be contaminated with radioactive elements in excess of acceptable limits, or should the planting of coconuts be delayed, the people of Enewetak and the United States should agree on how such an event is to be handled. Matters to be resolved are

- the particulars of testing cash crop coconuts for radioactive elements uptake;
- the method of disposal if the copra is found to be unacceptably contaminated with radioactive elements; and
- the amount of compensation, if any, for such loss.

The Department has not, as yet, made the decision that planting should be done in contaminated areas and, at this stage, is not prepared to offer solutions to the above questions.

There is no question, however, that should the 14,000 trees not be planted, arrangements for compensating the people for loss of potential copra revenue must be worked out.

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III. Specifying what the responsibility of the United States would be should the people of Enewetak choose not to observe recommended living pattern restrictions

The GAO notes that the United States does not plan to clean up all the islands of Enewetak Atoll to the point where no restrictions would have to be imposed. Therefore, the GAO report holds that it is imperative that a provision be made specifying the United States' responsibility should the people of Enewetak choose not to observe recommended living pattern restrictions.

As the Department of the Interior pointed out in its original comments on the draft GAO report, up to the present, the Enewetak Planning Council and the Enewetak-Ujelang Council have pledged that the people will follow the restrictions recommended by the Department of Energy. Similar pledges could be obtained when all of the cleanup and rehabilitation work is completed. The Department of the Interior continues to believe that it is not possible to demand "formal unqualified assurances", short of the United States Government or the new Marshallese Government keeping a permanent security force on the atoll to enforce restrictions. Reliance must be placed upon the representatives of the people themselves.

IV. The course of action to be taken should the people of Enewetak receive excessive doses of radiation

and

The specifics of followup radiological surveys and of monitoring the health of the resettled people and the radioactivity in the environment

The GAO report contends that because of the uncertainty of the long-term effects of exposure to low-level radiation, it is possible that the people of Enewetak could receive radiation doses in excess of current standards even if they adhere to living pattern restrictions. Further, even if the people of Enewetak do not receive excessive radiation doses by current standards, their doses could eventually be considered excessive should radiation dose standards become more stringent. The GAO report contends that, according to EPA sources, there is a good possibility that will happen.

The GAO report holds that representatives of the people of Enewetak and the United States should agree, in advance, on what course(s) of action will be taken should either of these possibilities become a reality.

There currently is before the U.S. Congress a bill, H.R. 3756, which includes a provision for a program of medical care and treatment and environmental research and monitoring for any injury, illness, or condition that may have been the result of nuclear testing for the people of the atolls of Bikini, Enewetak, Rongelap, and Utirik, and for

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their descendants. This program would include health care, periodic comprehensive survey and analysis of the radiological status of the aforementioned atolls and periodic development of an updated radiation dose assessment, together with an estimate of risks associated with the predicted human exposure, for each of these atolls.

H.R. 3756, has been approved by the House of Representatives, and now is under consideration by the Senate. Enactment of this or similar legislation would provide for health care. Environmental monitoring by the U.S. Government should provide safeguards to prevent the people from exposure to excessive doses of radiation.

V. The specifics of a supplemental feeding program, if required, until the people of Enewetak are agriculturally self-sufficient

GAO contends that until the agricultural system provides enough food for the people of Enewetak when they return to their home atoll, the United States may need to initiate a supplemental feeding program to fill the void. The possible extent of the feeding program at this time is uncertain; however, the particulars of the program, including the criteria for starting and ending it, could be resolved.

The Trust Territory Government and the Department of the Interior are exploring this matter with the people of Enewetak and their legal counsel. The Department of the Interior, on behalf of the Government of the Trust Territory, will attempt to work out satisfactory arrangements for a supplemental feeding program, should this prove to be necessary.

VI. The Secretary of the Interior should initiate an independent technical assessment of the Enewetak Cleanup project

The draft GAO report recommended that the Secretary should initiate independent laboratory quality control checks of the soil samples taken from Enewetak in order to assess the radiological cleanup criteria used by Defense (DNA) to meet the project goals and also to have an independent assessment for the post-cleanup radiation hazards.

In its comments on the draft report, the Department noted that to carry out certain of these assessments, i.e., to contract for independent quality control checks of soil samples, the Secretary essentially would have to look at the same research institutions currently used by other Government agencies, notably the Department of Energy. The radiological cleanup criteria also appear to have been set by the Environmental Protection Agency. Further, in his preliminary comments, the Secretary noted that the Department of Energy has established an advisory committee, composed of leading scientists in the radiation field, which reviews all the research analyses and recommendations. Accordingly, it was originally the view of the Department of the Interior that adequate radiological assessment was being carried out on the Enewetak Cleanup program.

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Since that time, however, the Department has reexamined this proposal. The final GAO report now places the recommendation in a somewhat broader context, i.e., not so much in terms of having the Department of the Interior repeat a soil analysis, but rather in terms of having experts who have no direct connections with the nuclear testing program or the Enewetak cleanup project perform an independent assessment of the cleanup criteria and the post-cleanup hazards. The final GAO report holds that this independent assessment could be made by reviewing the Department of Energy's radiological support data for the project.

For its part, the Department of Energy has stated that it would welcome an independent assessment of the radiological support that has been provided to DNA and DOI in their cleanup and rehabilitation activities and has offered its full cooperation in any such independent assessment.

Accordingly, in this context, the Department of the Interior now is studying the prospect of having independent experts make an assessment of DOE's radiological support data.

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