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Suffering Effects of 50's A-Bomb Tests

By SARAH KERSHAW

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EMMETT, Idaho, Aug. 31 - In the 1950's and early 1960's, at the height of the cold war, people in this southwestern Idaho town thought what they occasionally saw dusting their fruit orchards and cow pastures was frost - only it was not cold to the touch, several longtime residents said. Others described it as a gray-white powder that seemed to come out of nowhere.

The residents of this town of dairy and cattle farmers did not know it then, but half a century ago, northern winds blew radioactive fallout into southeastern Idaho when the federal government set off about 90 nuclear bombs at its Nevada test site near Las Vegas.

There is not any doubt that Emmett, population 5,500, and other towns in four Idaho counties were exposed to high levels of radiation from the open-air atomic bomb blasts, receiving

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Melanie Conner for The New York Times
A native of Emmett, Idaho, with cancer, Sheri Garman, 52, raised the concern about radioactive fallout.

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among the highest doses of a radioactive chemical that has been linked to increased risk for thyroid cancer. The National Cancer Institute in 1997 released a detailed study and a map plotting the locations of the fallout across the country, ranking concentrations of Radioactive Iodine-131, an isotope released when a nuclear bomb is detonated, from Nevada to upstate New York. The study put the four Idaho counties - Gem County, which includes Emmett; Lemhi; Blaine; and Custer - and one in Montana at the top of that list.

But few Emmett residents heard about that study, dozens said in recent interviews. Even as sick residents of other Western states received compensation from the government, the question of how Idahoans may have been affected by the nuclear tests received little attention. But now a furor has erupted here and elsewhere in Idaho, set off by one Emmett native, who survived thyroid cancer but is dying of breast cancer that has spread to her liver and her bones.

The native, Sheri Garman, 52, who now lives in Vancouver, Wash., wrote a long letter to an Idaho state legislator - a high school classmate - after learning that the National Academy of Sciences, at the request of the federal government, is currently re-evaluating the extent of the fallout from the Nevada test site and its connection to other cancers and diseases besides thyroid cancer.

The academy's Board on Radiation Effects Research has held three hearings on the matter over the last year, two in Utah, including one on July 29, and one in Arizona.

"I think Idahoans were severely misled on the seriousness of the situation," Ms. Garman wrote on July 14 to Kathy Skippen, a state representative from Gem County. "It's not just thyroid cancer. It's not insignificant. It's deadly, expensive and it is known."

Like many Emmett residents, Ms. Garman grew up on a dairy farm, drinking fresh milk. Children of her generation living in places like Emmett, where the 1997 cancer institute study showed residents had received large doses of Radioactive Iodine-131, are at greater risk for developing thyroid cancer because the cows ingested contaminated grass.

The study, of 3,071 counties, concluded the fallout caused or would eventually cause tens of thousands of cases of thyroid cancer. Radiation from fallout is measured in rads; one rad is equivalent to the amount of radiation absorbed by the thyroid of a person who has 10 X-rays in the neck area. Residents of the four Idaho counties, the study

▪ [Map: Emmett, Idaho](#)

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Jeff T. Green for The New York Times

"Somebody needs to own up to the fact that they messed up," said Richard Rynearson, 62, of Emmett, who is dying of cancer.

said, received average thyroid doses of 12 to 16 rads, but the dose to some children may have been as high as 100 rads.

Idaho officials, including Gov. Dirk Kempthorne, then a United States senator, responded to the study by calling the situation an "outrage" and demanding further investigation. At the time Mr. Kempthorne also asked that Idaho be included in a government compensation program that now provides \$50,000 each to residents of 21 counties in Utah, Nevada and Arizona whose illnesses have been diagnosed with any of 19 cancers. But Idaho residents were not included in the compensation program, which has thus far paid \$780 million to other "down winders" exposed to radiation during the bomb tests as well as employees at the weapons testing sites and uranium mine and mill workers.

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