

Local 'Downwinders' remembered by Prescott City Council



Sherri Hanna, a local advocate for victims of nuclear testing, is hoping that assistance for those victims will continue. (Courtesy)



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Originally Published: January 30, 2021 7 p.m.

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In remembrance of Yavapai County's "Downwinders" — including two of its own members — the Prescott City Council brought attention this week to the 1950s and 1960s area residents who suffered impacts from nuclear weapons testing in Nevada that took place during that era.

Mayor Greg Mengarelli read a proclamation that noted, "Despite the assurances of the Atomic Energy Commission, many Yavapai County residents working and living downwind from aboveground nuclear testing sites were adversely affected by the radiation exposure generated ..."

The proclamation adds that because many county residents continue to suffer effects, "It is important that we remember and address the lingering public health impact of the aboveground nuclear on the citizens of Yavapai County and Southwestern United States."

Councilman Steve Blair, a native of Prescott, said he is a Downwinder, and members of his family had suffered from cancers related to the radiation exposure from the weapons testing. "So yes, it hits home," Blair said during the discussion of the proclamation.

Councilwoman Cathey Rusing said she also is a Downwinder, as are members of her family, as well as "pretty much everyone in Prescott and northern Arizona."

Since 2011, Jan. 27 has been recognized as the Day of Remembrance for Downwinders, commemorating the day on Jan. 27, 1951, when the first above-ground nuclear weapons tests were conducted at the Nevada Proving Grounds about 65 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

Because of the prevailing winds that carried the contamination, the affected residents were termed "Downwinders," and are considered at risk for 19 types of cancer, including esophageal and breast cancer, as well as non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Prescott native Sherrie Hanna, a Downwinder herself, has been working for years to bring attention to the plight of those who were affected. Both her father, Ken Wayman, and her husband, John Hanna Sr. — a former Prescott City Councilman — died of cancers linked to the radiation exposure.

Along with getting the word out about the risks, Hanna has also worked to let people from the testing era know about the compensation and exams that are available through the U.S. government's Radiation Exposure Compensation Act of 1990.

For affected Downwinders who contract one of the listed types of cancer, a benefit of \$50,000 is available through the federal government.

With the possibility that the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act will expire in July 2022 if it is not renewed by Congress, Hanna said it is important to let people know about the potential exposure, and the available compensation.

This past week, Hanna said she continues to work with U.S. Reps. Paul Gosar and Greg Stanton to get the legislation extended.

In a letter to local officials, Gosar wrote, "As we as a nation remember our American Downwinders today, I do so solemnly with a vow to continue to fight for all American Downwinders and their families."

Hanna said she hopes that Congress will be able to extend the funding for the program. If the act were to expire, she said, "It would be hard to get it back."

Even though Hanna has been working to get the word out for years, she said she gets calls regularly from people who were unaware of the exposure, as well as the compensation and cancer screenings that are available.

More information is available on the Downwinders website at <https://downwinders.info/>.

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