

from the office of

Senator Edward M. Kennedy

of Massachusetts

OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR EDWARD M. KENNEDY
AT A HEARING ON THE LONG-RANGE HEALTH EFFECTS
OF RADIOACTIVE FALLOUT FROM THE ABOVE-GROUND NUCLEAR TESTS
CONDUCTED BY THE UNITED STATES IN THE 1950s

SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

For release:
8:30 a.m.
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Today's hearing is about the relationship of a democratic government to its people. A totalitarian society survives on the basis of fear of government. A democracy survives on the basis of trust in government. Today's hearing is, in a very real sense, about the erosion of a people's trust and faith in their government. For the record will show that for over twenty years the Federal Government placed the citizens of Utah at risk without their consent, without their knowledge and without taking proper precautions. The record will show that the tests conducted in the 1950s may very well have resulted in the cancers of the 1960s and '70s. The record will show that the people of Utah, who have always prided themselves on their patriotism, and who believed the repeated assurances of their government, have come to feel they were misled, perhaps even deceived, by that government.

As the truth about what the government knew and didn't know, did and didn't do, told and didn't tell, becomes public, the erosion of trust in government spreads far beyond the boundaries of Utah. How many Americans believe today that they know the full truth about the Three Mile Island accident; that they know the truth about radiation levels in the Harrisburg area? That they can accept the health and safety assurances of their government? That is why President Carter was wise to promptly appoint an independent commission to investigate the accident and report to the American people.

We are only now beginning to understand the health implications of exposure to low-level radiation. We are only now learning that the risk is cumulative, increasing over time--long periods of time. We are only now learning to correlate the medical occurrences of today with environmental exposures that took place, or began, decades before.

There is much research that needs to be done. Revision of radiation exposure limits may have to be made. But it is wrong to allow the agency of government responsible for the development of nuclear energy to be primarily responsible for research into its health implications and for the development of health and safety standards. That is what got us into trouble here in Utah. The agency responsible for conducting the tests was also responsible for the health and safety of the surrounding population. This set up conflicting interests, which in this case always resulted in a decision to proceed.

I will soon introduce legislation to place the primary responsibility for radiation research in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. In addition, the Health Subcommittee will take a hard look at how radiation safety guidelines are set and will determine whether a new legislative mandate is needed in that area.

But these are long-range solutions and do not address the immediate needs of the people of this state. How we address those needs will determine whether the long and painful process of restoring trust in government has a chance to succeed. At the very least, three things need to happen:

(1) All records of this incident--not just HEW's, but those of the Department of Energy and Department of Defense must be made public and reviewed by experts. This requires considerable declassification of materials--which should be done.

(2) All relevant epidemiologic studies must be carried to their completion, with periodic progress reports and a full, final report made public.

(3) The government should thoroughly and publicly examine the liability question.

Finally, let me acknowledge the extraordinary work of your governor, Scott Matheson, in getting the Federal Government to reopen this entire matter. His personal intervention with the President has given us all a chance to finally determine what happened and why. It is perhaps the Federal Government's last chance to set the record straight; to make amends; to regain the trust of the people of Utah. It is a chance we must make the most of.