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Utah news

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Downwinders get more funding

Congress passes a variety of measures that will aid Utahns

By Jerry Spangler

Deseret Morning News

WASHINGTON — The 108th Congress put finishing touches on its lame duck session in a rare Saturday session that lasted well into the evening. And before the gavel fell, lawmakers had rejected the development of certain nuclear weapons and passed an omnibus \$388 billion appropriations act that will keep the federal government running for the next year — and fund several important Utah projects and programs of interest to Utahns.

Due in large part to the efforts of Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah, who sits on the appropriations committee, downwind victims of nuclear testing in the 1950s and 1960s will get \$27.8 million to fund a shortfall in the compensation program.

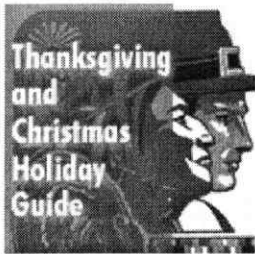
"These funds mean Utah downwinders won't receive another IOU from the government this year," said Bennett. "I'm especially pleased that necessary funds for this important program be available this year. This is an obligation the government must meet."

Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, principal sponsor of the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act, also was instrumental in getting the funding for downwinders.

"We've been fighting for this funding all year," Hatch said. No compensation act "claimant should receive an IOU because the program ran out of funds. I'll continue pressing for the government to give radiation exposure victims in Utah and across the West the compensation they deserve."

The Department of Justice, which oversees the downwinder compensation program, testified before Hatch's Judiciary Committee in August regarding the long-term financial solvency of the program. During that hearing, both Justice

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Department officials and the Government Accountability Office told Congress the trust fund will run out of money and claimants will be issued IOUs unless additional funding is found.

The new funding ensures the Radiation Exposure Compensation act will be financially solvent through 2007.

The increased funding also follows another provision already signed into law that allowed uranium miner, miller and transporter compensation act claims to be paid by the Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program Act. By moving these workers to the energy employees program, more Radiation Exposure Compensation Act trust fund dollars are now available for claimants such as downwinders.

Utah has the second-largest number of compensation act claimants in the United States.

Also of interest to those living downwind of the Nevada Test Site was the final language of appropriations bills for research and development of nuclear weapons. The Energy and Water Appropriations bill dropped provisions that would fund the Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator — a bunker-buster nuclear warhead — and new advanced concepts weapons designs.

"I am very proud to be among those who stood up to the administration and said we won't go down the path towards the resumption of nuclear weapons testing," said Rep. Jim Matheson, D-Utah. "Utahns have paid dearly for government deception about the safety of nuclear weapons testing."

Matheson said the fight over the resumption of nuclear weapons testing is not over, but he is relishing what he calls a great victory for Utahns living downwind.

Vanessa Pierce, program coordinator for Healthy Environmental Alliance of Utah, was on Capitol Hill lobbying against the weapons funding, and she said she was pleasantly surprised that the nuclear weapons funding was eliminated from the budget.

"We just did not dream they would agree to eliminate the nuclear weapons program," Pierce said. "It's definitely a victory for all Utahns and all the members of Congress who saw those programs as ill-conceived and a waste of taxpayer money."

"It's imperative that we prevent a second generation of downwinders," she added.

The bill in its final form shifts \$9 million from advanced concepts research on new weapons designs to the Reliable Replacement Warhead program. That funding will be used to improve the reliability and longevity of existing nuclear weapons and their components.

Altogether, the legislation provides \$6.5 billion for weapons activities.

Funding also was increased for methamphetamine interdiction in rural Utah. Another \$750,000 was added to the program to help Box Elder, Rich, Wasatch, Tooele and Juab counties purchase video monitors, mobile cameras and other surveillance equipment used to locate clandestine labs.

"Continued support for law enforcement efforts is essential to combat these dangers and widespread problems," Bennett said.

The funding boosts the total for Utah counties to \$4.8 million. Utah is one of the top five states for per capita methamphetamine production.

The appropriations bill also includes \$400,000 to help Utah's rural teachers who teach three or more subject areas to obtain additional training for certification purposes by utilizing distance education.

"As Utah educators attempt to meet new demands of No Child Left Behind, they're often called on to do things without adequate compensation," said Bennett. "I'm hopeful these funds will help offset some

of the unrealistic burdens of this new law."

The Association of Utah Community Health, a private non-profit program, will see an \$800,000 appropriation to provide medical services to low income and uninsured populations.

"These community health centers offer crucial health services to a segment of our community in need," said Bennett. "Funds to continue these kinds of services is an important and valuable investment in the health of our citizens."

Congress also appropriated \$5 million more for a new Utah Museum of Natural History to be located in Research Park. That money brings to \$8 million the amount of federal funding, which is authorized to increase to \$15 million through future appropriations.

And \$1 million was appropriated to the Utah Shakespearean Festival to aid in the design and construction of a new Elizabethan theater in Cedar City.

Lawmakers also reinstated for four years the moratorium on Internet access taxation that had expired on Nov. 1, 2003. The four-year extension is retroactive to Nov. 1, 2003, and will expire on Nov. 1, 2007.

In September 2003, the House unanimously passed HR 49, co-sponsored by U.S. Rep. Chris Cannon, R-Utah, which had called for a permanent moratorium on Internet access taxation. The final version worked out between the House and Senate during the lame duck session calls only for a four-year moratorium.

"The Internet has exceeded our collective expectations as a revolutionary spring of information, news and ideas," Cannon said. "It is essential that we keep that spring flowing. We must not thwart the Internet's availability by taxing access to it."

Cannon said he will continue working to make the moratorium permanent.

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