US settles with some Hanford radiation downwinders

Associated Press

SPOKANE — The U.S. Department of Energy has agreed to settle claims brought by 139 people with thyroid disease who believe radiation releases from the Hanford nuclear reservation caused their illnesses.

The proposal marks the largest settlement so far in a civil case that has lasted 20 years.

Details of the settlement, which were filed this week in U.S. District Court in Spokane, must be accepted by the individual plaintiffs.

Each plaintiff with hypothyroid disease would receive $5,683 for a total amount just under $800,000, according to Kevin Van Wart of Chicago, the attorney representing Hanford contractors E.I. DuPont De Nemours & Co. and General Electric Co.

Van Wart called the proposed settlement "progress," but told the The Spokesman-Review newspaper for a story Thursday that "it doesn't represent an admission of government wrongdoing.

The hypothyroidism plaintiffs are all represented by Roy P. Haber of Eugene, Ore. Haber did not return a telephone call seeking comment.

Roughly 2,000 people say they've suffered from radiation they were exposed to as children. They lived in eastern Washington, eastern Oregon and Idaho, downwind of the Hanford nuclear reservation, as the U.S. government was developing the first atomic bombs in the 1940s.

A $27 million government study concluded in 1990 that the releases had put people at risk for developing thyroid disease, triggering the litigation.

Nearly 1,400 plaintiffs remain in the case.

The government indemnified the private contractors who ran Hanford and has paid over $60 million for their defense in the Hanford case. Plaintiffs' lawyers have spent nearly $10 million from their own funds to pursue the personal injury claims.

All verdicts and settlements in the case will be paid by the federal government.