Final report released on Clear radiation accident

Washington—Congressman Don Young (R-Alaska) today announced that the General Accounting Office (GAO) has released its final report on the radiation accident which occurred at Clear Air Force Station, Alaska, on September 14, 1983. Young requested that the GAO conduct the investigation of the accident, as well as Air Force and civilian contractor operations at Clear, after he received unsatisfactory responses about the incident from the Air Force and FELEC Services, Inc., the operator of the site.

"This report reprsents a comprehensive study of the factors that led to the accident," Young said. "Clearly, if all conditions of operation and contract compliance had been met, the incident would most likely not have occurred."

Clear Air Force Station is one of three such sites in the world which comprise the nation's Ballistic Missle Early Warning Missile System. One September 14, 1983, six contractor employees and two Air Force civilian employees were exposed to radiofrequency (RF) radiation for nearly eight minutes while performing maintenance on a tracking radar antenna at the site.

The GAO investigation was conducted over an 18-month period and included interviews conducted at and data obtained from Air Force, FELEC, and other government and State of Alaska agencies.

In brief, the GAO concluded that the workers were exposed to the radiation because the equipment at Clear was not laid out and operated as required by the contract. Contractor noncompliance with contract specifications and systemic problems in Air Force contract management practices allowed the accident to happen and go undetected for eight minutes.

The GAO recommended that the Air Force perform the following modifications to operations at Clear to reduce the likelihood of another radiation accident:

- Conform the key interlock safety system with design specifications and ensure all safety procedures used,
- make necessary configuration changes to properly align prime transmitters with corresponding radars,
- require the contractor to comply with minimum staffing requirements and ensure that technicians are fully trained and qualified, and,
- assign only adequately trained and experienced personnel as quality assurance evaluators.

GAO also recommended that the Secretary of the Air Force conduct a survey to determine if similar problems exist at other radar installations.

Comments on the report were received from the Department of Defense, the State of Alaska, and the FELEC Services, Inc. DOD and the state concurred with the GAO report. FELEC replied that the GAO report misrepresents the true facts of the case and circumstances surrounding the accident.

"It is vitally important that Clear and other sites like it be operated in a manner that protects the health and safety of employees," Young said. "After talking to the Air Force and reviewing the contractor's comments after the accident, I was convinced that a GAO inquiry was necessary because I wasn't being given a straight answer on this issue.

"I believe that this report spells out the areas of deficiency, and I plan to continue to monitor the operations at Clear to make sure that the suggested improvements are incorporated," said Young. "As for the affected employees, it is now up to the courts to review the circumstances of the accident to determine if compensation is due," he added.