

NS Borough files lawsuit on behalf of residents

The North Slope Borough has filed a \$428 million group claim against four federal agencies on behalf of Alaska Native residents who were subjected to radiation exposure without their knowledge during government-sponsored experiments in the mid-1950's.

Seventy residents or their estates have authorized the nation's northernmost municipal government to file this claim for compensation. They represent nearly all of the known individuals who received one or more doses of Iodine 131 or other radioactive materials in conjunction with

military experiments to determine the role of the thyroid gland in the ability to tolerate cold climate conditions.

"Some of these people didn't even know they were part of a scientific study," said North Slope Borough Mayor George Ahmaogak, Sr. "The ones who did only knew they were helping the government and doing their patriotic duty. Nobody ever told them their health might be at risk from a dangerous experiment with radiation."

Test subjects were residents of Alaska's North Slope villages of

Wainwright, Point Lay and Anaktuvuk Pass. They included elderly men, nursing mothers and at least one child; most of whom spoke little or no English. None of them were informed they ingested doses of radioactive material, exposing them to the equivalent of up to 700 chest x-rays, nor were they alerted to the potential risks of such exposure. In fact, they believed the testing was for routine medical purposes, and many apparently participated because the testing included a complete physical check-up, which

was a rare opportunity in remote Alaskan communities at that time.

Excessive radiation exposure can lead to increased incidence of cancer, immune system malfunction, spontaneous abortion and other medical problems. The borough is seeking to force the government agencies to release medical records and other related information that has been withheld in the past.

"This is a shameful episode in the history of federal government relations with our people," Mayor Ahmaogak said. "Innocent people may have died before their time.

Others may have developed serious illnesses, and those who are still healthy have to live with the fear of cancer or some other disease from that radiation."

The claim has been filed against the Air Force, Department of Interior (BIA), Department of Health and Human Services (IHS and PHS), and Department of Energy (successor to the Atomic Energy Commission). The federal agencies have six months to answer the claim. The borough may then seek a remedy through the courts.