

July 16, 2020

Seventy five years ago today, the world as we knew it changed dramatically at a place in central New Mexico's Tularosa Basin that scientists called the Trinity Site..

The Trinity Test was the first detonation of a nuclear weapon in human history. It was the culmination of work by hundreds of thousands of Americans and allied scientists working in sites across the country as part of the top-secret Manhattan Project. This was a scientific and engineering mission on a scale never seen before or since. Less than a month after the Trinity Test, President Truman would order the use of the two other atomic bombs developed by this project to put an end to the fighting in World War II, but also to a deadly and long-lasting impact on the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki too horrible for words.

We are still grappling with the complicated history and ongoing consequences of the creation of nuclear weapons 75 years later. We appreciate and admire the scientists, engineers, military leaders, and workers who went to places like Los Alamos, Oak Ridge, and Hanford to beat Nazi Germany's scientists in the enormously consequential race to develop this lethal technology. It is a sad truth that these weapons were ever used by our country, and we all pray that they will never be used again. In New Mexico, employees at Los Alamos and Sandia National Laboratories continue working to this day to maintain the safety and security of our nuclear deterrent while also contributing to critical nonproliferation work that can lead us toward a future without nuclear weapons.

The families who lived in and near New Mexico's Tularosa Basin, downwind from the Trinity explosion, continue to live with another part of New Mexico's nuclear legacy - the trauma and health impacts of a nuclear test they were not warned about in advance. Many families were exposed to the radioactive cloud leaving the Trinity site and its aftermath. These families were never told that the white dust falling all around them in the days following the test would make them ill or contaminate their crops, their water, and their livestock. They were never told of the variety of cancers that would befall them later in life and the loved ones that would be lost after much suffering.

Other communities in New Mexico continue to address waste storage and environmental cleanup work stemming from decades of nuclear energy and weapons programs. In particular, the uranium mill workers and miners, who for decades contributed to our nation's nuclear security during the Cold War, also continue to cope with serious health problems due to exposure to radioactive material. All of these Americans await the justice and compensation from our nation that they deserve for their sacrifice. It is long overdue for Congress to finally amend the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act to include the Trinity Downwinders, all Americans downwind from other nuclear tests, and all of the uranium workers who were exposed to radiation in service to our national defense.

It is my hope that future generations will engage with the history found at the recently established Manhattan Project National Historical Park and think critically about the living legacy of the work that led up to Trinity.

We should all pause to reflect today on the gravity of this moment in our history. And then we should commit ourselves to the never ending work to build a more peaceful world.