



The Perilous and Lasting Impacts of Nuclear Weapons on Environmental Health



On August 6 and 9, 1945 the world witnessed the horrors of the nuclear bombs dropped in the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Survivors suffered severe burns, injuries, and cancers that have spanned subsequent generations. Higher rates of miscarriages, infant deaths and children born with intellectual disabilities were all reported. Animals and plants also died or became ill.

Effects of Nuclear Weapons in the United States

The first atomic bomb was detonated in New Mexico's Trinity Test Site on July 17, 1945, weeks prior to the Japan bombings. The largely Native American and Latino communities situated downwind from the test received no warning. Children played in the "white snow" which covered laundry, crops, homes, and water.

Survivors of that test, known as "downwinders," and their descendants experience similar maladies as people in Japan. The impacts went unacknowledged for decades.

Today, there are thousands of victims of atomic weapons testing, production and waste in the United States and its territories.

By the Numbers

1945

Year that the United States released bombs in New Mexico, Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

120,000

Estimated killed by atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

1,000

Nuclear weapons tests conducted by the United States throughout the country and U.S. territories until 1991.

Policy Efforts to Restore Right Relationships

In 1990, the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act was signed into law. More than 34,000 survivors received some relief, but it excluded Trinity site “downwinders” and other important groups.

In 2025, the bipartisan Radiation Exposure Compensation Reauthorization Act (RECA) led by Senator Josh Hawley (R-MO) was signed into law. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops supported RECA.

The adopted RECA expands “downwinder” eligibility to more states, including New Mexico, and to workers and communities in states where uranium was mined, milled, and stored.

Nuclear Power

Nearly all uranium mined today is used for nuclear power, a fossil fuel alternative. More domestic mining is projected due to growing energy needs, raising anew concerns about adequate protections for the environment, workers, indigenous sacred places, and meaningful public consultations.

Church Teaching

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis affirmed that war always does grave harm to the environment and to the cultural riches of peoples. He prayed at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial for all the victims of atomic bombings and experiments. “Never again so much suffering!” he lamented.

Following Pope Francis’ visit, numerous U.S. bishops pleaded for a “world of peace and justice that is not based upon fear or the threat of nuclear annihilation but justice and human solidarity,” and called upon our government to renew its primary responsibility in that effort.

As Pope Leo XIV said, “Our mission to care for creation, to foster peace and reconciliation, is Jesus’ own mission, the mission that the Lord entrusts to us. We hear the cry of the earth, and we hear the cry of the poor, because this plea has reached the heart of God..”

Prayer for the End of Nuclear Weapons

Christ, who is Lord and Prince of Peace,

May your peace reign in our hearts and in the hearts of all people, that we may work for a culture of life, a culture of trust, and a culture of peace, so that we never again experience the “incandescent burst of nuclear war” that the world saw in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which left behind only shadows and silence where life was once abundant. May your mercy be upon us as we solemnly remember all whose lives have felt the tragic imprint of nuclear weapons. We pray through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

