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Department of Energy Announces Improvements to the Energy Employees Occupations Illness Compensation Program

*Tells Congress that \$33 Million Plus FY'04 Appropriation
Is Necessary for Accelerated Case Processing*

Washington, D.C. – The U.S. Department of Energy announced today that it has met an interim goal of processing more than 100 worker compensation claims per week for applications it has received under the Energy Employees Occupational Illness & Compensation Program (EEOICPA) passed by Congress in 2000. Last week, 106 applications were completed and prepared for review by the independent physician panels.

Prior to receiving the approval to increase funding for the program, the Department was processing approximately 43 cases per week. That rate jumped to 106 per week following Congressional approval of DOE's request for \$9.7 million in funds and changes to the management program DOE was currently implementing.

“We continue to see significant progress in handling the claims filed by former contract workers,” said Undersecretary of Energy Robert Card. “We have witnessed a steady improvement in case processing in recent weeks as we implement the changes we made earlier this year and received increased funding from Congress.”

In addition, the Department has made Congress aware of additional funding requirements, noting that to accelerate claims processing it will need at least an additional \$33 million in Fiscal Year 2004, on top of the actual FY 2004 appropriation request of \$16 million.

The Department has also elevated management of the workers compensation program to Undersecretary Robert Card's direct supervision. “This program spans so many internal DOE functions that we need to raise its reporting to a higher level to ensure the fastest possible processing of applications for assistance,” said Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham.

Key to continued progress is to ensure that program remains a funding priority for Congress. From FY 2001 to FY 2004, the Department of Labor received approximately \$346 million to administer its portion of the workers compensation law, while DOE has received \$74 million. In that time, DOE has assisted the Department of Labor in processing over 33,000 claims.

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When the workers compensation legislation was enacted in 2000, the previous administration estimated that there would be a total of 3000 claims paid and the cost associated with those claims would be \$360 million for both the DOL and DOE portions of EEOICPA. Since then, applications for the two programs have reached nearly 70,000 and the cost to this point in the program has exceeded \$1 billion, with tens of thousand of claims left to be processed.

“The original estimates on the number of claims and the expectations set for handling these cases was inaccurate,” said Undersecretary Card. “To thoroughly and comprehensively process these claims, as we assumed Congress intended, we must receive the support of Congress and the necessary funding.”

“Our charge is to process workers’ claims and assist them in filing the best case for compensation when their case is reviewed by state workers’ compensation boards. We will not shortchange the workers by providing incomplete or inaccurate documentation in these cases, just to move the cases off our desk.”

In August, the Department commissioned an independent review of the administration of the workers’ compensation program by the Hays Companies. That study identified areas for improvement in processing workers’ claims. In addition to steps taken earlier this year to improve the program, the Department has responded to the issues outlined in the “Hays” draft study, including:

- Improve functionality of the Case Management System (CMS) computer system for easier use by case management staff.
- Continue to utilize the 24-hour toll-free case hotline (1-877-447-9756) providing up-to-date information on claims for filers.
- Continue to consolidate case filings systems.
- Continue to assign record collection functions at DOE’s 10 resource centers.
- Restructure staff and streamline roles and responsibilities to ensure efficient handling of cases, and
- Where appropriate, streamline the work of the independent physician panels in making determinations on cases, ensuring efficiency in that review process.

EEOICPA has two primary programs. One is an entitlement program run by the Department of Labor and supported by DOE. This program pays lump sum benefits plus continuing medical coverage for former workers with diseases potentially related to radiation exposure, silicosis and chronic beryllium disease. The other program that the Department of Energy administers provides no direct benefits but assists workers in pursuing claims with state workers’ compensation programs. This second program covers a much broader array of medical conditions and requires extensive employment history development to provide the workers with the best opportunity for claim defense.

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