

Holding the Government Accountable on the Big Blast
By Congressman Jim Matheson

Confronting the government's efforts to design, develop, and—I believe—ultimately test new nuclear weapons, has been my primary mission as Utah's representative. I voted against funding for the nuclear Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrator or “bunker-buster” as well as money for test site readiness. I opposed rescinding the ban on research and development of new nuclear weapons. I introduced legislation requiring the government to prove it is safe prior to resuming underground nuclear tests. Now, I question the latest proposal by the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) to detonate a mammoth pile of chemical explosives at the Nevada Test Site, 65 miles outside of Las Vegas.

The test, dubbed “Divine Strake” was approved in 2002, in a Department of Defense bill. It is described in a budget document as a “full-scale tunnel defeat demonstration using high explosives to simulate a low yield nuclear weapon ground shock environment at Department of Energy's Nevada Test Site.”

Last April, I wrote to James Tegnalia, Director of DTRA, voicing my concerns. Chief among them, that Divine Strake was being conducted in order to further misguided attempts to build new low-yield nuclear devices. I wrote that at 700 tons, the Divine Strake demonstration won't simulate an actual conventional bomb because no bomber in the U.S. fleet can carry a weapon that size.

In subsequent briefings to me, as well as in news media interviews, DTRA officials confirmed that this would be a dual-purpose test—supporting research efforts to predict damage to deep underground facilities from both conventional and nuclear devices.

In my April 2006 letter, I asked what precautions would take place to ensure that radioactive debris from the test site, home to hundreds of past open-air and underground nuclear tests, wouldn't be hurled into the atmosphere, exposing those downwind from the blast. The government's initial environmental assessment—issued in May prior to its original June 2006 test date—declared that no radiation would become airborne, or escape the Nevada Test Site. I asked to see the supporting data, but none was produced. At the same time, Nevada air quality officials refused to issue state environmental permits for the test, due to insufficient data. I shared Utahns' relief when the test was postponed indefinitely. It seemed to me a tacit acknowledgement that uncertainty about the health and safety risks remained.

Utahns are understandably leery when Department of Energy officials say, in essence, “trust us, there is no danger.” During the years of above-ground testing, Southern Utah residents were repeatedly told not to worry about ash falling thick as snow, and strangers about town, carrying Geiger counters. Congressional hearings and declassified documents later showed that the testing only took place when the prevailing winds blew the fallout towards the least-populated area. Subsequent health studies calculated that thousands of deaths resulted from exposure to the radioactive fallout. The more we look, the more damage we uncover from this era.

When in November, DTRA announced moving ahead with Divine Strake in Nevada, I again objected. I warned of unanswered questions about the purpose of the test and the fears for health and safety. The public open houses held in St. George and Salt Lake City were inadequate. Last week, Sen. Orrin Hatch and I again wrote to DTRA, requesting meetings where Utahns' questions can be asked and answered in open session for all present to hear.

The government's latest environmental study contradicts the first. It says radioactive particles will become airborne and may contribute a "radiological dose" to the public, but in too small an amount to pose a health risk. Why such a different conclusion? What more will we find out as we continue to question and dig?

In 1980, the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce concluded that the Atomic Energy Commission had engaged in a sophisticated scientific cover-up aimed at protecting the testing program in Nevada at any cost. As a Utah Congressman, my priority is to hold our government accountable for the health and safety of our citizens prior to any proposed nuclear weapons testing. We never want to go down that path of lies and betrayal again.