



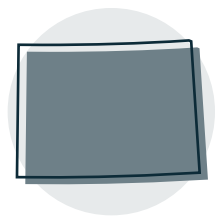
# Nuclear Issues for the Colorado General Assembly

Although many decisions about nuclear weapons are made in Washington, DC rather than Colorado, state-level legislation taking a stance on issues or policies can still be very important in changing national and even international decisions on nuclear issues. This memo offers an overview of past state-level initiatives in Colorado to reduce nuclear risks and identifies future steps the Colorado General Assembly could take to further reduce nuclear risks.

From 1952-1989, plutonium pits (i.e., triggers) for nuclear weapons were produced at the Rocky Flats Plant in Colorado. Today, the former plant is a Superfund site. However, nuclear weapons are based in Colorado today: Warren Air Force Base (on the Colorado-Wyoming border) hosts approximately 150 Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles tipped with nuclear warheads. Colorado is thus part of the 'nuclear sponge' that would absorb or bear the brunt of incoming nuclear weapons if nuclear war occurred. Consequently, it is important for the Colorado General Assembly to take steps to reduce nuclear risks.

## **Examples of past legislation and other efforts to reduce nuclear risks**

The nuclear freeze movement was a grassroots movement in the early 1980s that advocated for a freeze on the testing, production, and deployment of nuclear weapons in the United States. The Freeze was endorsed by 275 city governments and 12 state legislatures. None of these states or cities had the authority to stop the production or deployment of nuclear weapons on their own. However, these endorsements changed national politics: the Freeze became part of the Democratic Party platform in 1984 and (combined with other factors) led the Reagan administration to initiate arms control with



Russia in the START I and Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces treaties. Such state-level resolutions and legislation can have a real impact on changing national policy over time.

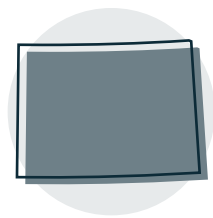
In 1974, Coloradan voters passed the Detonation of Nuclear Devices amendment to the state constitution, requiring any nuclear testing or any nuclear detonations at all in Colorado to be approved by voters in advance. Nuclear weapons were never tested in Colorado, but nuclear explosive devices were used in Rulison, Colorado in 1969 and 1973 to release natural gas. This was a failure economically and raised considerable concern in Colorado about the environmental and health impacts. The Denotation of Nuclear Devices amendment was a response to these concerns. Coloradan voters have never approved any nuclear testing or nuclear detonations since the amendment was passed.

**Options for future legislation (note: these are illustrative examples, not endorsements of any specific legislation)**

Although the Rocky Flats plant was fully decommissioned in 1989 and decontamination work finished in 2005, there exist today recurrent concerns over environment contamination from the site. To address these concerns, the Colorado General Assembly could pass a bill urging Congress to authorize greater funding for further cleaning up Rocky Flats. The Colorado General Assembly could also commission a new study of the contemporary environmental and public health effects of Rocky Flats on surrounding communities.

The Colorado General Assembly could pass a bill in support of the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. This international treaty banned the development, testing, production, possession, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons. Fifty-four countries have ratified the treaty, but no country that possesses nuclear weapons has joined. Under the Trump administration, the United States was one of the leading opponents of the treaty. State legislatures in California, Oregon, Maine and New Jersey have followed with their own resolutions in support of the treaty, as have cities and towns in many states.

Building on the Colorado Detonation of Nuclear Devices Amendment, the Colorado General Assembly could pass a resolution acknowledging the damaging legacy of nuclear testing. For example, in 2020, the Washington State Senate adopted a resolution acknowledging the “painful and damaging” legacy of nuclear weapons testing in the Marshall Islands (SR 8701). The resolution also recognized the link between Washington State and nuclear weapons testing in the Marshall Islands, noting that much of the plutonium used in nuclear weapons detonated in the Marshall Islands was processed at the Hanford nuclear reservation site in Washington State. Colorado’s Rocky Flats was also involved in producing plutonium for nuclear weapons that were tested in the Marshall Islands, and ‘downwinders’ in Colorado suffer health effects from increased rates of radiation exposure. By emphasizing the harmful legacy of nuclear weapons testing, such legislation would contribute to further stigmatizing nuclear testing. Moreover, it would strengthen claims for compensation and assistance from the US federal government for the long-term health effects of US nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands and US nuclear weapons production in Colorado and the Southwest.



The Colorado General Assembly could also pass a resolution calling on Congress to renew and expand eligibility under the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA), which is scheduled to expire in 2022. Former uranium miners in Colorado who suffer from a variety of health conditions are eligible for compensation, but many have not yet received compensation. Many Coloradans who were exposed to radiation and suffered health effects, but who were not employed as uranium miners, are not currently eligible under RECA to receive compensation. Such a state-level resolution could help build national support for extending RECA and expanding eligibility for compensation.

The Colorado General Assembly could pass a bill in support of a diplomatic approach to preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. In the leadup to the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action (the JCPOA or 'Iran deal') in 2015, there was little state-level engagement in support of diplomacy. State-level legislation expressing support for diplomacy could have significantly helped build the case further at the national level. The Biden Administration is currently trying to re-enter the JCPOA. Regardless of the outcome, a bill of support for diplomacy in next year's legislative session could help sustain support for diplomacy.

*For questions or further information, contact: [programs@trumanproject.org](mailto:programs@trumanproject.org). The Truman Center for National Policy is an independent policy institute that brings together leaders from government, the private sector, and civil society to develop strong, smart and principled solutions to the global challenges Americans now face. As a non-profit 501(c)3 organization, the Truman Center is committed to developing policy ideas that advance the economic and national security interests of the United States.*