

(headline) GROOM LAKE REMAINS 'SECRET'

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(sub) Clinton exemption: Air Force information will stay classified.  
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Las Vegas--President Clinton has signed an exemption allowing the Air Force to withhold classified information about Area 51, a secret base northwest of Las Vegas.

The base, also known as Groom Lake, has been used in the testing of aircraft such as the U-2 spy plane, the F-117A Stealth Fighter and the SR-71 Blackbird reconnaissance plane.

Some former workers at the site have filed suit against the government, saying they were exposed to toxic contaminants while working at the remote base.

U.S. District Judge Philip Pro ruled on Aug. 30 that the government could not claim certain documents sought in the lawsuit were classified unless it obtained an exemption from Clinton.

Clinton signed the exemption Sept. 29, saying: "It is in the paramount interest of the United States to exempt the Air Force from disclosing classified information about the base".

Attorney Jonathan Turley, a law professor at George Washington University who represents the workers, had hailed Pro's decision as a victory. Turley said Monday he was not discouraged that an exemption was granted.

"The military should not conclude that a presidential exemption is the same as a presidential pardon," Turley said. "This relieves them of current and future responsibilities. If nothing else, we can accept that the activities at Groom Lake have been reviewed at the highest office".

Lawyers for the Department of Justice filed a motion Monday asking Pro to reconsider parts of his decision.

Attorneys Russell Young and Sylvia Quast argued that Congress never intended to require presidential action regarding disclosure of classified information. They said the order would frustrate the current system that presidents use--the delegation of classification decisions to subordinate executive branch officials.

\*Associated Press.