



Press Advisory

Group Applauds Safety Reforms at Hanford

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DOE Making Significant Positive Improvement in Chemical Vapor Protection for Workers

A watchdog group is congratulating the leadership at the DOE's Office of River Protection (ORP) at the Hanford Nuclear Site for steps it is taking to respond to worker health and safety issues.

Hanford Challenge, a regional public interest group that monitors Hanford cleanup, is responding to a recent DOE announcement of a set of initiatives to provide better protection against chemical vapor protection initiatives to the Hanford Advisory Board's Health and Safety Committee. Hanford is a former plutonium production facility that is the nation's most-contaminated facility. The DOE initiatives include:

- **Better oversight by DOE:** DOE has hired a Certified Industrial Hygienist who has recently completed an assessment of the Industrial Hygiene program of Washington River Protections (WRPS). The assessment made significant findings and ordered corrective actions to be taken. The contractor is also taking significant steps to address safety and health concerns.
- **Support of an independent expert panel review:** DOE has enthusiastically supported the Hanford Concerns Council, a neutral mediation council, in its work with the Hanford contractor WRPS to hire an expert panel to evaluate the implementation of an effective and responsive Industrial Hygiene program.
- **ALARA:** DOE is instituting an "ALARA" approach for chemical exposure, which is an acronym for "As Low As Reasonably Achievable." This approach, already used for radiation exposure, is more conservative than the historical approach of attempting to set "acceptable limits" of exposure.
- **Community involvement:** DOE is launching a Health and Safety Community Forum this summer in response to the outpouring of concerns from workers at last year's state of the site meeting in Richland. Listening to and engaging workers in a meaningful way is the first step to

creating an effective and long-term program to address the numerous issues surrounding chemical vapors.

- **Improving medical and compensation systems:** DOE is taking steps to identify and implement appropriate medical response to workers who present with exposure complaints to chemical vapors by working with on-site health responders. For those already made ill from tank vapors, ORP is beginning to address the compensation systems that have failed injured workers for years. DOE has hired a new third-party insurance provider, Penser North America, Inc., which is based in Washington State, in an effort to provide better worker compensation service to Hanford workers. DOE is also working with representatives from the Department of Labor's compensation program to better educate and improve the system of compensation under the Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Act program. This includes bringing Labor Department employees to the Hanford Site and making sure that it has complete and accurate information about the chemical and radioactive hazards specific to Hanford. DOE is also assuring that worker's files have more complete information about the chemical hazards they face in the workplace, and the potential injuries that could result from exposure to those hazards.

Hanford Challenge noted that the initiatives were taken by DOE Manager of Office of River Protection Shirley Olinger after a fall 2008 public meeting in Richland, Washington, where numerous workers spoke out about the ongoing failure to take steps to better understand and prevent exposures to chemical vapor hazards primarily resulting from Hanford's high-level nuclear waste tanks, where 53 million gallons of the nation's most toxic waste is stored.

"Shirley Olinger has taken her department on an impressive course of action to address this pervasive hazard and prevent further exposures," stated Tom Carpenter, Director of Hanford Challenge. "These initiatives represent the first real progress in truly addressing the chemical vapor issue at Hanford, and have replaced denial of the issue with honest inquiry."

Chemical vapors collect in the headspace of Hanford's underground high-level waste tanks and are released into the work areas during activities. Lack of protective gear and persistent denial of the existence of vapor hazards have led to numerous injuries and illnesses, some long-term in nature. For years, Hanford Challenge and nuclear operators in the Steelworkers Union have pressured tank farm contractors and the DOE to acknowledge and take action to minimize chemical vapor exposures. Scientifically suspect chemical sampling data has been the basis to justify inaction on and denial of the vapor issue in the tank farms. This has made compensation claims by vapor-injured workers much more difficult.

- 30 -

DOE's Initiatives and its April 15, 2009 Assessment can be found on the web [here](#).

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