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Hanford cleanup chief has Nagasaki roots

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HANFORD, Wash. (Kyodo) For Shirley Olinger, managing the cleanup of the Hanford nuclear site — where the plutonium was generated for the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki in 1945 — is personal.

Nagasaki is her mother's hometown.

Established in 1943, the government-run Hanford Nuclear Reservation is in south-central Washington state along the [Columbia River](#). Water from the river was used to cool the plutonium-producing nuclear reactors.

The facility was part of the Manhattan Project to develop nuclear weapons during [World War II](#). Once the plutonium was extracted from the uranium, chemical processes left large amounts of highly toxic waste at the site.

According to the Hanford Challenge, a Seattle-based watchdog group, the 1,517-sq.-km reservation is the most contaminated toxic waste site in the United States and among the top 10 in the world.

The Department of Energy, where Olinger, 52, works as manager at the Office of River Protection, is the lead federal agency in charge of physical cleanup at Hanford.

"The good news is we are all in it together," Olinger said of the department working alongside the Environmental Protection Agency and the Washington state Ecology Department. "We all want to clean up Hanford in the most sustainable and best-quality way."

Many of the toxic chemicals from the contained nuclear waste at Hanford have now leaked into soil or the nearby Columbia, releasing several harmful chemicals such as carbon tetrachloride.



Birthplace of a bomb: This reactor building is part of the Hanford nuclear site in Washington state that produced the plutonium for the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki in 1945. KYODO PHOTO

According to Dennis Faulk, EPA program manager for Hanford, about 96,000 kg of carbon tetrachloride has already been removed from the soil in Hanford since 1989, when the cleanup initiative began. In addition, 13,100 kg of carbon tetrachloride has been removed from the water.

Olinger pointed to the emptying of a large container of nuclear fuel known as the K-basin, and the stopping of the nine nuclear reactors at Hanford as evidence that the agencies together have made some headway in the cleanup.

Despite these signs of progress, Tom Carpenter, executive director of the Hanford Challenge, warns that the bulk of the work has yet to be done.

"I call this 'stopping the bleeding' because it was damaging the environment," Carpenter said. "But what can we really say about tank waste? Ninety percent of the Hanford cleanup is this waste. And I think they are stuck."

Tank waste refers to the 200 million liters of high-level toxic waste stored in 177 underground tanks at Hanford. Unable to be held any longer without leakage or decay, the waste must be transported to a new storage unit with as little impact on the environment and residents as possible.

Olinger, whose office specifically manages tank waste retrieval, is optimistic about the progress so far despite the concerns of the Hanford Challenge.

"There have been technical issues that we have been dealing with in the past," she said. "At this moment we are down to one. I'm hoping that the last technical issue . . . will be resolved by (September)."

The project is scheduled to be completed in 2019.

Liz Mattson of the Hanford Challenge said Olinger requested face-to-face meetings with activists starting last November. Mattson now refers to Olinger as the Hanford Challenge's "biggest advocate for reform."

With her Japanese mother and relatives surviving the impact of the Nagasaki bomb, Olinger's family history speaks to the legacy and trauma of nuclear warfare.

Olinger said that during a family trip last year to Nagasaki, she heard stories of relatives and other people who were not recognized as victims of the bomb's radioactive fallout by the Japanese government.

Members of Olinger's family had suffered from thyroid problems, infertility and cancer.

"I got to talk to a few of these people and today they are taken well care of," said Olinger, "but for decades they weren't. . . . The government didn't know how to deal with them."

Now representing the U.S. government and managing perhaps the largest nuclear cleanup in the Western Hemisphere, Olinger charges herself with both personal and professional responsibility to remember those affected by the cleanup as much as those relatives who were so negatively impacted by the dropping of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki during World War II.

"We want to do this cleanup in a robust way that's sustainable and respectful of stakeholders and the workers. If we don't do that on our watch, then who is going to? I have a lot of passion toward the health and safety of the workers."

One of Hanford's most vital community stakeholders, the Hanford Advisory Board, is another proponent of Olinger's mission to have a robust and sustainable clean up.

The board creates consensus-based, policy-level advice to the Department of Energy, the EPA and Washington state offices to consider the safety of the local community while making technical decisions about the cleanup.

Susan Leckband, chair of the board and a fourth-generation resident of the Hanford area, said the cleanup is important to Americans and Japanese alike.

"Not only is this (cleanup) honoring those Americans," Leckband said of the people who went to Hanford to help out with the war effort more than 50 years ago. "It is also honoring the lives of those people who were lost (in [Japan](#)). Something positive is coming out of this. There won't be any more bombs built here."