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Hanford Challenge Seeks Rule to Improve Safety Culture at Work

Protecting freedom of speech for workers when it comes to raising safety, health and environmental concerns at nuclear sites has been a focus for Hanford Challenge since its inception.

Employees at sites like Hanford are the first line of defense for safe and effective operation of the facility, including the efforts to remediate the long-lasting and deadly legacy of plutonium production.

That is why Hanford Challenge recently filed a [formal petition](#) with the Department of Energy, the agency that owns and operates the Hanford Nuclear Site, to enact a rule applicable to all nuclear contractors that establishes a Safety Conscious Work Environment. This is a formal program adopted by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) to ensure that employees are free to raise concerns internally without reprisal or fear of reprisal. Failure to maintain such an atmosphere on the part of an NRC licensee can result in suspension of the operating license and fines. The NRC audits commercial nuclear facilities and takes action if it finds that a nuclear operator has a “chilled working environment” that discourages the raising of issues.

Hanford has a long and inglorious history of reprisals against Hanford workers who raised concerns in the recent past. Many dozens of workers, including auditors, pipefitters, health physicists, scientists, geologists, managers and others have lost their jobs and brought legal actions because of retaliatory conduct against them after they blew the whistle.

One of the more recent examples was the \$7 million jury verdict against Hanford contractor Fluor Federal Services after 11 pipefitters filed complaints following their terminations for refusing to install a questionable valve in a high-level radioactive waste piping system.

A Safety Conscious Work Environment (SCWE) is defined as a work environment in which employees are encouraged to raise concerns and where such concerns are promptly reviewed, given the proper priority based on their potential safety significance, and appropriately resolved with timely feedback to employees. Attributes of a Safety Conscious Work Environment include (1) a management attitude that promotes employee involvement and confidence in raising and resolving concerns; (2) a clearly communicated management policy where safety has the utmost priority, overriding, if necessary, the demands of production and project schedules; (3) a strong, independent quality assurance organization and program; (4) a training program that encourages a positive attitude toward safety; and (5) a safety ethic at all levels that is characterized by an inherently questioning attitude, attention to detail, prevention of complacency, a commitment to excellence, and personal accountability in safety matters.

“The public relies on employees at sites like Hanford to come forward with issues that might affect human health and safety, the environment, and efficient use of government resources. Such employees deserve strong and effective protections against reprisal, and the government should make sure that there is free-flow of information from workers so that problems are addressed at an early stage and effectively,” states Tom Carpenter, Executive Director.

The next step is for DOE to decide to issue the Rule for public comment and consideration, at which point it could be adopted into law.