

Watchdog group calls for Hanford revamp after audit

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Greenwire

Published: Monday, January 16, 2012

A watchdog group for the nation's largest nuclear waste site is demanding that Energy Secretary Steven Chu halt construction at the plant in light of an internal report that found employees were unwilling to challenge management decisions.

Hanford Challenge has long been critical of the Hanford, Wash., waste treatment plant, which is slated to begin treating 56 million gallons of nuclear waste in 2019. Friday's [audit](#) -- from DOE's Office of Health Safety and Security (HSS) -- confirmed some of the group's concerns, reporting "a definite unwillingness and uncertainty among employees about the ability to openly challenge management decisions" ([Greenwire](#), Jan. 13).

That finding should prompt Chu to order a "safety stand-down" and change of leadership, said Hanford Challenge Executive Director Tom Carpenter.

"There are too many outstanding unresolved safety and design issues to justify continued construction at the Pre-Treatment Facility," he said. "It is unconscionable to punt these problems down the road. An audit is needed to affirm what safety concerns are out there that people have been afraid to raise that need to be investigated. This course of action would be normal for the commercial nuclear sector. We should demand nothing less of the nuclear weapons complex."

Bechtel National has spent decades building the waste treatment plant under DOE's direction. The company denies allegations of a broken safety culture; last month, an independent panel Bechtel convened agreed, finding that no "chilled atmosphere" exists ([Greenwire](#), Dec. 7, 2011).

The HSS audit followed up on a June report from the independent Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board (DNFSB) that found supervisors subtly communicated to employees that differing opinions were not welcome. But the HSS report is not quite as harsh, attributing employees' silence to a "perception" that management does not encourage concerns.

Carpenter highlighted one "telling" statistic in the HSS report: Only 30 percent of survey respondents felt they could openly challenge decisions made by management. That's far from the office's report of little more than a year ago that attributed the perception of a broken safety culture to small "pockets" of employees.

DOE officials did not immediately respond to a request for comment. But last week, they pledged to use the audit's findings to inform an "aggressive action plan" to improve the site's safety culture.

"Ensuring that employees are comfortable freely raising safety and technical concerns -- and that they feel confident that their concerns will be effectively addressed -- will continue to be a major focus of the department's efforts as we move forward," said Dave Huizenga, DOE's acting assistant secretary for the environmental management program.