



Press Release

Energy Department Proposes to Abandon Untreated High-Level Nuclear Waste in Underground Tanks Next to the Columbia River

Immediate Release
June 11, 2018

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Richland, WA: The Department of Energy (DOE), is seeking public comment on a proposal to **re-label** (or “reclassify,” or “rename”) Hanford’s highly-radioactive tank waste so it will not have to comply with the time-consuming requirements of treating and disposing of the remaining tank waste in C-Farm in a legally-compliant (and protective) manner.

The [proposal was released](#) on June 4, 2018 on DOE’s Hanford website. DOE’s draft Waste Incidental to Reprocessing (WIR) evaluation declares that the remaining 66,000 gallons of high-level radioactive waste “residue” in the C Tanks are low-level wastes using the internal DOE order 435.1. This reclassification would allow DOE to abandon this remaining waste in place and dump cement, or grout, on top of this waste. If successful, DOE would also be able to relabel other high-level waste as low level waste at Hanford.

“A serious question is now on the table: will the government live up to its legal duty to remove and dispose of high-level nuclear waste from Hanford, or leave it abandoned at Hanford using semantics,” said Tom Carpenter, Executive Director of the non-profit organization **Hanford Challenge**. “This would be a serious setback for the cleanup at Hanford if the DOE is allowed to turn Hanford into the nation’s high-level nuclear waste dump. This will be challenged.”

Geoffrey Fettus, a senior attorney at the **Natural Resources Defense Council**, and the attorney who led a legal challenge to an earlier iteration of this idea in the early 2000s, stated, “Leaving untreated radioactive waste next to the Columbia River was a bad idea when the Bush administration tried it, and it’s an even worse idea now from the Trump administration. The people of the Pacific Northwest deserve better and we’ll be there with them opposing this unsound and unsafe effort.”

Even though DOE attempts to characterize the residual amount of waste as “incidental”, the volumes are quite large. For instance, DOE provided data on *just one* of the C Farm tanks, C-102, which reveals that the **total volume** of residual waste in tank C-102 is estimated at 59,214 cubic/ft, an amount that would fill a football field one foot deep. This waste contains **plutonium concentrations 12 to 57 times greater** than the plutonium disposal standard set by DOE and EPA. Plutonium has a half-life of 24,500 years meaning it will take over 240,000 years to decay.

The DOE has designated a 96-day Public Comment period for its proposal, with a deadline to submit comments by September 7, 2018. Hanford Challenge has requested the DOE to hold regional public hearings with the opportunity for public comment and to extend the comment period in order for the public to effectively weigh in on this proposal.

Cement does not effectively contain nuclear waste. Reports have stated that use of grout for long periods involved in the disposal of radioactive waste (more than 100 years) is outside the general operating envelope for cementitious materials. The cement also allows water infiltration and breaks down quickly in the presence of caustic materials such as nuclear waste. The DOE has spent hundreds of millions of dollars attempting to qualify grout at Hanford as a storage medium for long-lived nuclear waste. Those studies have all concluded that **grout is not an effective** storage medium.

Implications of the WIR Evaluation

- The proposal violates the Nuclear Waste Policy Act. DOE does not have authority to re-label these wastes.
- Abandoning long-lived nuclear wastes in the tanks at the volumes and concentrations that DOE is proposing also violates other legal requirements for the disposal of plutonium.
- Hanford is not a qualified or appropriate place to dispose of high-level nuclear waste.
- DOE has identified **dozens of Hanford waste tanks** contending that they contain no high-level nuclear waste, which would leave a pathway for using less rigorous standards to treat and dispose of this waste, potentially allowing these tanks to either be left in place and filled with concrete or to have wastes removed and dumped onsite in cement.
- DOE would also relegate unto itself the authority to declare so-called residual waste from the rest of the Hanford tanks as “low-level waste,” potentially leaving tens of millions of gallons of this long-lived waste at Hanford.
- This proposal would challenge the decades-long consensus that the path for Hanford’s tank waste is vitrification – immobilizing the wastes in glass and disposing of the vitrified waste in a deep, geologic repository.

“Let’s be clear – Hanford is proposing short-cuts to the cleanup that will save money, but will in the end further damage the environment, and impact human health and safety and future generations,” said Carpenter. “The Hanford site is particularly ill-suited to the long-term disposal of high-level waste, with a major river system bordering the site, subject to flooding, riddled with earthquake faults, situated near several active volcanoes, and periodic glacial flooding.”

Hanford Challenge called for Hanford’s tank waste to be removed, properly treated through vitrification, and legally disposed of in a deep geological repository licensed by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. The group called on Congress to stop the DOE’s plan to abandon tank waste in place at Hanford, and mandate that Hanford build new tanks to protect the groundwater and nearby Columbia River from future tank failures.