

Oregon to join Hanford clean-up lawsuit

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

Gov. Ted Kulongoski and Attorney General John Kroger announced yesterday that Oregon will seek to join a lawsuit against the federal government over the longstanding failure to clean up the Hanford Nuclear Reservation on the Columbia River.

"This suit is about compelling the federal government to uphold its commitment to protect fully our environment and our citizens," Governor Ted Kulongoski said. "Further delay is unacceptable. The federal government must make this clean up a priority and meet its obligations to address the environmental and public health risks that the Hanford site continues to pose."

"Hanford poses a major risk to our health and environment," Kroger added. "It is time to clean it up."

The U.S. Department of Energy in 1989 agreed to a schedule for cleaning up at least 1,500 hazardous waste sites at Hanford, a former plutonium production site and part of America's nuclear weapons complex.

Among other things, the agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Washington State's Department of Ecology requires the U.S. Department of Energy to stabilize 53 million gallons of high-level radioactive waste, much of it stored in 149 aging, leak-prone single-shell underground tanks.

The 1989 agreement initially called for the treatment plant to be operational by 1999. After repeated extensions, the Energy Department is still likely at least a decade away from the treatment facilities coming on line. Although most of the free liquids have been moved out of the single-shell tanks, about 30 million gallons of waste remains in these tanks and further delays in getting the treatment facilities operational greatly increases the risk of future leaks and further environmental harm.

Unable to agree on a new schedule for operating the treatment facilities and for retrieving waste from the older tanks, Washington last November filed a federal lawsuit accusing the Energy Department of failing to abide by the 1989 agreement. Oregon has filed papers seeking to join the suit.

Oregon has a particularly strong interest in the clean-up because the Columbia River flows through the Hanford site. Clean-up delays increase the risk of serious environmental damage to the river.

Hanford's hazardous waste also puts at risk the traditional fishing grounds of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

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