

Senator calls for accountability at Hanford Nuclear Waste Treatment Plant

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Citing a recent report by the Inspector General of the Department of Energy -- which stated that the control system intended for use at the Nuclear Waste Treatment Plant at Hanford “does not meet the stringent procedures, plans, specifications, or work practices associated with nuclear quality standards” -- U.S. Senator Ron Wyden (D-Oregon) sent a letter to Secretary Samuel Bodman today asking what actions the Department will be taking in response to the Inspector General’s findings.

Hanford Nuclear Waste Treatment Plant - photo courtesy of whitehouse.gov — On top of the litany of problems already plaguing construction of the Hanford Waste Treatment Plant, the Inspector General’s report raises serious concerns about the Department’s ability to manage nuclear waste clean-up,” Wyden said. “Failure to properly manage the project has already added eight years of delay and billions of dollars to the taxpayer’s bill. Assurances need to be made that this project is being taken seriously.”

In March 2006, Wyden requested that the Inspector General conduct an investigation after a former employee of Bechtel National, Inc — the U.S. Department of Energy’s principle contractor for the Hanford Nuclear Waste Treatment Plant Project — raised concerns about his former employer’s use of unproven and flawed control systems.

Wyden’s letter to Secretary Bodman is below. ([Click here to read the Inspector General’s Report.](#))

The Honorable Samuel Bodman
Secretary
U.S. Department of Energy
1000 Independence Ave.
SW
Washington, DC 20585

Dear Mr. Secretary,

In March 2006, I requested that the Inspector General of the Department of Energy conduct an investigation

into complaints that equipment and control systems destined for use in the Nuclear Waste Treatment Plant at Hanford did not meet nuclear safety and quality standards. The Inspector General has just completed the first portion of this investigation concerning the plant's integrated control system. The Inspector General found that this system "does not meet the stringent procedures, plans, specifications, or work practices associated with nuclear quality standards." For its part, the Department's contractor continues to insist that it has done nothing wrong and the proposed control system is acceptable. I am therefore requesting an explanation of what actions the Department intends to take in response to the Inspector General's findings.

The Inspector General's report quite clearly identifies a number of areas where the Department's contractor failed to establish adequate quality assurance requirements to ensure that the proposed control system met the Department's standards for nuclear activities. For example, the report states that the prime contractor "Bechtel National" had not made sure that subcontractors working on the system had appropriate quality assurance programs, had not clearly set forth the quality assurance standards the system was supposed to meet, and had not consistently applied those standards throughout the plant.

The report also concluded that the Department itself had not properly managed this activity and made sure that Bechtel National was meeting the Department's quality assurance standards. In fact, the report notes that the Department "was unaware of the nuclear quality assurance standards issue prior to our review."

Unfortunately, this is just the latest example of serious management problems concerning the design and construction of this high-level waste treatment facility "a facility that is essential to the clean up of millions of gallons of high-level waste at the Hanford site. This facility is already being delayed approximately eight years until 2019 at a cost that has more than doubled " from \$5.8 billion estimated in 2003 to this year's estimate of \$12.3 billion. DOE still lacks a viable plan for more than half of the so-called low-activity waste that is supposed to be removed from the waste tanks and which also has to be vitrified.

Please describe what actions the Department will take to address the Inspector General's findings concerning the design and procurement of this control system and the Department's management of the Waste Treatment Facility. I look forward to your response at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Ron Wyden United States Senator

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