

State & U.S. Announce Hanford Cleanup Breakthrough

Local News

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RICHLAND, Wash. - With the ongoing construction of the Waste Treatment Plant (WTP) in the background at the Hanford Site, Energy Secretary Steven Chu joined Washington Governor Chris Gregoire, Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski, Washington Attorney General Rob McKenna, U.S. Senators Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell, acting U.S. Assistant Attorney General John Cruden and other officials today to announce a proposed legal settlement that will impose a new, enforceable and achievable schedule for tank waste cleanup at the Hanford Site in southeastern Washington State.

The Washington State and federal officials announced a proposed judicial consent decree that will be filed in federal court, then be subject to a public comment period. The proposed consent decree between the Department of Energy (DOE) and Washington State will set a new and achievable schedule for construction and startup of the WTP and the retrieval of waste from the large underground single-shell storage tanks at Hanford. Hanford currently stores 53 million gallons of radioactive and chemical waste in 177 underground tanks at the Site. The proposed consent decree settles litigation that was filed by Washington State last November and joined by the State of Oregon in February to compel the Energy Department to complete key aspects of the Hanford cleanup. In tandem with the consent decree, the Department of Energy, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the Washington State Department of Ecology are proposing changes to their 1989 Tri-Party Agreement to establish a new, realistic but aggressive schedule for completing waste retrieval from all single-shell storage tanks by 2040, and treating all of the tank waste by 2047. The modifications to the Tri-Party Agreement will also be subject to a public comment period before they are finalized.

The waste from the single-shell tanks will be removed and pumped to newer double-shell tanks, and ultimately transferred to the WTP where it will be immobilized into a sturdy glass waste form through a process called vitrification.

In addition, DOE and the State of Oregon have agreed upon a consent decree that recognizes Oregon's strong interest in the cleanup effort and provides Oregon the right to receive copies of certain reports and notices that DOE must file under the consent decree with Washington State; the right to participate as observer in joint three-year reviews with DOE and Washington State; and prior notice of any motion by DOE filed with the court to modify the consent decree with Washington or invoke judicial dispute resolution proceedings under its terms.

Oregon and Washington will also enter into a separate Memorandum of Agreement that will solidify the two states' cooperative efforts regarding Hanford. Under the agreement, the Oregon Department of Energy will have the opportunity to review the Department of Ecology's correspondence with DOE, consult with Washington State regarding changes and progress at Hanford, and provide input before final decisions are made.

The Tri-Party Agreement would extend the current schedule for completing retrieval of waste from single-shell tanks from 2018 to 2040, and completing treatment of all tank waste from 2028 to 2047.

These new schedules are, in reality, aggressive, but achievable. With a goal of accelerating the completion dates, the proposed agreement adds a process for reviewing the final completion dates every six years. Each six-year review will determine whether the completion dates can be accelerated. At three-year intervals, a detailed system plan will be generated to evaluate options for accelerating cleanup. This "End Date Review Process" ensures that the Hanford tank waste cleanup remains as aggressive as possible.

As a result of the negotiations and settlement, the Department of Energy will issue an upcoming draft environmental impact statement that will include a preferred alternative of not importing certain off-site radioactive, mixed radioactive and hazardous waste to Hanford at least until the WTP is operational. Once the draft environmental impact statement has been issued and if public comment doesn't identify a reason for not executing the consent decree, the state and DOE will move to enter the consent decree with the federal court and will also finalize the Tri-Party Agreement changes described above.

Under the agreement, DOE will also prepare a lifecycle analysis of all Hanford cleanup costs to meet legally mandated timelines for cleanup. The Tri-Party Agreement agencies today also finalized and signed changes in the agreement that establish new milestones for cleaning up contaminated groundwater under the Hanford Site to ensure protection of the Columbia River.

For more information about the Hanford cleanup, please visit: <http://www.hanford.gov/>

Comments from Obama Administration and State Officials are below:

Washington Governor Christine Gregoire: "This is a great day for Washington State, our neighboring state of Oregon, and the entire nation. It's a great day for the Columbia River, a lifeline of the Pacific Northwest, and for all the communities downstream from Hanford. We now have strong partners in the White House who are committed to cleaning up the existing toxic contamination and improving the health and safety of our citizens."

Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski: "The agreements announced today mark a critical turning point in our bi-state and federal partnership to clean up the Hanford site. I believe this renewed commitment to an aggressive clean up schedule and oversight will finally deliver the public health and environmental protection for the citizens on both sides of the Columbia River."

U.S. Energy Secretary Steven Chu: "Our agencies share a common interest in the protection of the environment, the public and the Columbia River. This agreement will ensure continued cleanup progress at the Hanford Site. I appreciate the commitment, perseverance and professionalism of all the people in the many organizations involved in these negotiations, who worked tirelessly over the past two years to reach this accord."

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson: "With today's announcement, we are charting the course for a successful cleanup at Hanford. We simply must step up to the challenges at Hanford to protect the Columbia River and the communities that depend on it. Today, we renew our commitment to get the job done and get it done right."

U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder: "I am pleased the parties have come together after years of effort to reach these important agreements that set Washington State, Oregon and the federal government on a pathway to cleaning up these sites. These historic settlements reflect the administration's strong commitment to environmental protection here in the Pacific Northwest and around the country."

U.S. Senator Patty Murray (D-Wash.): "This agreement is a blueprint for making real progress toward clean up goals. But to meet those goals we need to follow through with consistent budgets and a commitment to smart clean up policies. The people of this community have done everything that's been asked of them. We not only have a legal obligation to meet clean up milestones, we have a moral obligation to ensure this community's sacrifices are being honored."

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.): "This agreement will provide more certainty in meeting

cleanup milestones in order to help protect Columbia River communities while more quickly transitioning the site to new uses like a clean energy park. We now have the state and the Department of Energy on the same page working to open up this land to new uses, including clean energy generation. This is good news for the Tri-Cities economy."

U.S. Representative Doc Hastings (R-Wash.): "Throughout this long process, it's been clear that both Washington State and DOE have a shared commitment to cleanup. With today's announcement we can see that cleanup can best be achieved when parties sit down, talk and persevere through impasses and reach agreement. I'm hopeful that these changes will result in smooth, continuing cleanup progress."

Washington Attorney General Rob McKenna: "I'm proud to join my fellow state and federal leaders in announcing this settlement which includes firm timelines for Hanford cleanup that are directly enforceable by the court. By confirming its accountability for cleaning up this deadly waste, the federal government honors the Tri-Cities' contribution to defending our country from World War II through the end of the Cold War."