Nuclear Weapons Workers Overpaid by $8 Million in Stimulus Funds

MEG KINNARD, Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — More than 500 workers at a former nuclear weapons plant in South Carolina were overpaid by nearly $8 million in stimulus money, according to a federal audit.

The audit released this month by the inspector general for the U.S. Department of Energy centers on work at the Savannah River Site, a DOE complex along the South Carolina-Georgia border that once produced plutonium and tritium for atomic bombs.

In all, about 12,000 people work at the 310 square-mile site, where much of the work is now focused on research and environmental cleanup. To further those efforts, the site several years ago received $1.6 billion in stimulus cash to create and save about 3,000 jobs, which ranged from procurement and public relations to work doing construction and general maintenance.

As those jobs ran their course and the stimulus money was spent, employees were let go. According to the audit, site manager Savannah River Nuclear Solutions opted to pay 526 departing employees each for 60 days, on top of their separation benefits.

That plan ran counter to the Worker Adjustment and Retraining Notification Act, which says contractors should give advance notice when making layoffs. But if employers opt not to give notice, the bill doesn't require that they pay employees instead. So, by preemptively paying out the extra 60 days of severance, according to the audit, Savannah River Nuclear Solutions cost the Department of Energy $7.7 billion.

"While we are sensitive to the impact that the transition has on employees, the need to ensure that taxpayer provided funds are spent prudently is especially important in these trying budgetary and economic times," the report said.

The audit contrasts Savannah River's plans with Hanford, a Washington State complex also run by the Energy Department. Hanford, a former nuclear reservation that once also produced plutonium for the nation's nuclear weapons arsenal, received nearly $2 billion in federal stimulus cash to fund cleanup there.

Thousands of workers have been laid off at Hanford as that money runs out. But there, the inspector general said employees got advance notice they were being let go and kept working for several weeks.

Savannah River officials told the inspector general that, since 1993, contractors

there had typically paid departing employees rather than give advance notice that they were being let go. But they couldn't point to any documentation to back up that claim.

Energy Department spokesman Jim Giusti says the company will not have to repay the money.

"We agree with the findings," Giusti said. "Next time we do one of these, we will have the appropriate approvals in place."

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