DOE: Budget Cuts May Slow Nuclear Waste Cleanup

MATTHEW DALY,Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Cleanup of radioactive waste at nuclear sites across the country — including one in Washington state where waste tanks may be leaking 1,000 gallons per year — would be delayed under automatic spending cuts set to take effect Friday.

Energy Secretary Steven Chu says the cuts would delay work at the department's highest-risk sites, including the Hanford Nuclear Reservation near Richland, Wash., where six tanks are leaking radioactive waste left over from decades of plutonium production for nuclear weapons.

It was not clear Thursday whether cleanup of the leaking tanks would be affected by the spending cuts. Overall cleanup efforts at Hanford — one of the nation's most contaminated sites — would be curtailed, Energy Department spokesman Dan Leistikow said.

A report by Democrats on the House Appropriations Committee said more than 1,000 mostly private workers at Hanford could be furloughed. Hanford and other Energy Department defense sites where radioactive waste is stored would be forced to suspend or delay cleanup activities and even shut down some facilities, the report said.

At Hanford, the retrieval of radioactive waste from leak-prone underground tanks would be delayed, the report said.

The federal government built the Hanford facility at the height of World War II as part of the Manhattan Project, which built the atomic bomb. The site, along the Columbia River, holds at least 53 million gallons of highly radioactive waste — enough to fill dozens of Olympic-size swimming pools. Many of the tanks are known to have leaked in the past. An estimated 1 million gallons of radioactive liquid already leaked there.

Other high-risk sites facing work delays are the Oak Ridge Reservation in Tennessee, Savannah River Site in South Carolina and the Idaho National Laboratory.

The Energy Department is facing an estimated $1.9 billion in spending cuts, including about $400 million for the Office of Environmental Management, which oversees the cleanup at Hanford and other former military sites.

The automatic cuts also would slice $900 million from the National Nuclear Security Administration, which is responsible for maintaining and securing the nation's

nuclear weapons stockpile.

The agency's acting administrator said more than 5,000 private contractors and about 1,800 agency workers could be furloughed under the program cuts, which are scheduled to take effect Friday unless the White House and Congress can come to a budget agreement.

The spending cuts would affect all aspects of the agency's work, acting administrator Neile Miller told Congress this month. That includes "the safety and security of the (nuclear) stockpile, the facilities that maintain that stockpile, and the people and processes that provide the nuclear forces that provide us all with security," she said.

Specifically, the cuts could force furloughs of more than 600 mostly private workers at the Pantex plant in Texas, where excess nuclear weapons are dismantled, and 1,000 mostly contract workers at the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge, Tenn., where a break-in last year by three anti-nuclear protesters — including an 82-year-old nun — raised questions about the NNSA's oversight of private contractors. The agency announced in January that a new contractor has been hired to manage nuclear weapons facilities at the Tennessee and Texas sites.

Furloughs and 10 percent salary cuts also are likely at the Lawrence Livermore National Lab in California. A memo to employees from lab director Parney Albright called the cuts "unfortunate," but said the furloughs and salary cuts would allow the lab "to maintain continuous business operations and, especially, safe operations in an environment of unpredictable staffing."

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