Dept of Energy Proposes Water Treatment at Hanford

Associated Press

The federal government is recommending a phased start to treatment of radioactive waste now held in underground tanks at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Washington state. The Department of Energy, in a report released Tuesday, proposes starting to treat some of Hanford's 56 million gallons of waste for disposal as soon as possible, while work continues to resolve technical issues at the vitrification plant's Pretreatment and High Level Waste Facilities.

Treatment would include sending some low activity radioactive waste directly to the plant's Low Activity Waste Facility to be prepared for disposal. That would require bypassing the Pretreatment Facility, which originally was planned to separate all the tank waste into low activity and high level waste streams for separate treatment. The treated low activity waste then would be disposed of at a Hanford landfill. The Department of Energy also suggests retrieving up to 1.4 million gallons of waste from up to 11 underground single-shell tanks that may be classified as transuranic waste, which is typically contaminated with plutonium. The waste then would go to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico.

In June, the federal government notified state officials that it was at serious risk of missing two cleanup deadlines at Hanford, the nation's most contaminated nuclear site. Gov. Jay Inslee has said the state would work to ensure that federal cleanup commitments are met. Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash. said in a statement that the DOE proposal was a "step in the right direction." "I look forward to reviewing this framework and receiving a full briefing from DOE, and I remain committed to ensuring that DOE provides a full, detailed plan for comprehensively addressing the complicated challenges we still face," Murray said.

At the height of World War II, the federal government created Hanford to build the atomic bomb. Today, it is the nation's most contaminated nuclear site, with cleanup expected to last decades. The effort — at a price tag of about $2 billion annually — has cost taxpayers $40 billion to date and is estimated to cost $115 billion more. The most challenging task so far has been the removal of highly radioactive waste from the 177 aging, underground tanks and construction of a plant to treat that waste.

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