

Nuclear Whistleblower Firings Under Investigation

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SPOKANE, Wash. (AP) — U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., wants an investigation into the treatment of whistleblowers at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, after two were fired in the past five months after raising safety concerns about the construction of a \$13 billion plant to treat the site's most dangerous radioactive wastes.

Wyden's office said Thursday that he will ask the Government Accountability Office to investigate both the pattern of contractor retaliation against whistleblowers, and the U.S. Department of Energy's lack of response to those actions.

"The decision to fire yet another Hanford whistleblower shows that nothing has changed at the Energy Department when it comes to stifling dissent," Wyden said in a press release this week.

The goal of an investigation is to "personally hold accountable DOE officials for the unchecked retaliation against whistleblowers who have revealed major, legitimate risks to public safety," Wyden, long a critic of Hanford operations, said.

Donna Busche, manager of environmental and nuclear safety at the Hanford Waste Treatment Plant, was fired Tuesday morning by URS Corp. Walter Tamosaitis, who also worked at the Waste Treatment Plant construction site and raised safety concerns about the plant, was fired by URS in October. URS Corp. said Busche was fired for reasons unrelated to the safety concerns.

The safety concerns raised by the whistleblowers had helped lead to a halt of construction at the plant.

Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz had met with both Busche and Tamosaitis last June to discuss their safety concerns.

The WTP is being built by private contractors Bechtel National, Inc. and URS to treat Hanford's 53 million gallons of high-level nuclear waste.

Hanford, located near Richland, Wash., is operated by the Energy Department, which hires private contractors to perform much of the work.

The Waste Treatment Plant construction has been plagued with safety, design and quality assurance issues as well as significant delays, with construction costs skyrocketing from an estimated \$4.6 billion to over \$13.4 billion, Wyden said.

The one-of-a-kind plant is being built to convert the wastes into glasslike logs for

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Published on Chem.Info (<http://www.chem.info>)

permanent disposal underground.

The sprawling Hanford site was created by the Manhattan Project as the nation raced to build an atomic bomb during World War II. The site for four decades made plutonium for nuclear weapons.

But for the past 25 years, Hanford's major mission has been the cleanup of the nation's largest volume of nuclear waste.

The Waste Treatment Plant is supposed to be a centerpiece of the work, designed to treat the most radioactive wastes that are stored in 177 underground tanks. Some of those tanks have leaked.

Meanwhile, the federal government this week estimated that completing the cleanup of Hanford will cost another \$113.6 billion, an amount the Tri-City Herald reported Thursday equals about \$359 for every person living in the U.S. today. The estimate is based on completing most cleanup work by 2060, with oversight and monitoring until 2090.

Source URL (retrieved on 08/30/2015 - 11:56am):

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