Press Release

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Contact: Tom Carpenter
tomc@hanfordchallenge.org
206.419.5829

Is the Waste Treatment Plant Dead in the Water?
DOE proposal delays startup of WTP by 17 years. It is time to face reality and make a plan B.

Seattle, WA: Today, Hanford Challenge called on the Obama Administration to stop work on Hanford’s Waste Treatment Plant and immediately undertake the construction of 12 new underground nuclear waste storage tanks.

Hanford Challenge, a public interest organization that is working to bring about a safe and effective cleanup of the nation’s largest and most expensive environmental cleanup, issued the call in response to the U.S. Department of Energy’s proposal to a federal court to adopt a new date of 2039 for the full startup of the Hanford Waste Treatment Plant (WTP). The plant was originally scheduled to begin full-scale operations in 2011.

“Technical issues, delays, cost overruns, and quality assurance problems have been the story of this economic and environmental boondoggle. We have seen failure after failure in the attempt to save this sinking ship. Is the WTP dead in the water? Hanford Challenge wants Hanford’s highly radioactive tank waste immobilized in glass, but this path is not going to get us there. We need a plan B,” stated Hanford Challenge’s Executive Director Tom Carpenter.

Congress and the Administration should--

- Immediately require DOE to build new waste tanks.
- Stop all work on the Waste Treatment Plant
- Establish an independent entity to design a new path forward for treating all 56 million gallons of tank waste and determine if the WTP facility can be salvaged at all, given its myriad of problems.
- Replace Bechtel with a company that has a history of honestly meeting its performance guarantees and instilling a strong organizational culture, safety culture, and safety conscious work environment.
- Strengthen the whistleblower protection laws for both DOE and contractor personnel at nuclear facilities and make retaliation against whistleblowers a criminal act. When found guilty, laws should stipulate that contractors are subject to punitive damages and are at risk of losing their contract.
• Replace DOE with a commission that has the technical capacity and mandate to conduct a safe and effective nuclear cleanup with meaningful involvement of stakeholders, tribes and the public in decision making.

When Bechtel won the bid in 2000, it said it would cost $4.6 billion dollars to build the plant and their motto was “glass in 2008”. Now we are looking at a cumulative delay of over 3 decades and a total cost that will likely exceed $30 billion just to design and construct the facility. As designed, the WTP is only able to treat a fraction of the 56 million gallons of high-level tank waste. Note that these cited costs do not include the cost to operate these facilities nor treat the waste the WTP is not designed to handle.

“The facts must be faced: this plant has seen nothing but delay and more delay. By 2039 much of the plant equipment will be obsolete, equipment and pipes corroded and unreliable. It will be a safety nightmare,” said Carpenter.

Congress funds Bechtel nearly $700 million dollars per year. If this rate of spending continues over the course of DOE’s proposed 17 year delay, it will cost taxpayers an additional $12 billion, in addition to the $19 billion that has already been spent according to a June 2015 GAO estimate. This amounts to a $31 billion dollar investment in a facility that in all likelihood will not be licensable due to its quality assurance issues.

There is a documented pattern of reprisals and terminations related to the reporting of nuclear safety concerns at the Waste Treatment Plant. Senior technical managers and scientists have been publicly blowing the whistle on these concerns since 2010. Systemic change is needed to end this cultural of reprisal.

One-third of Hanford's 177 high-level radioactive waste tanks have leaked more than a million gallons that threaten the Columbia River - the largest fresh water artery in the Northwest United States. Despite a 30 year effort to engineer a vitrification system to safely immobilize this waste, not a single drop has been processed for safe disposal.

“The United States put a human on the moon in less than a decade using slide rulers, but DOE and Bechtel cannot build a waste treatment plant in less than 40 years. Systemic changes are needed to avoid repeating the failures of the past. The stakes are too high to continue business as usual,” said Carpenter.