PRESS RELEASE

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Contact: Tom Carpenter, Exec. Director
Phone: (206) 419-5820
Email: tomc@hanfordchallenge.org

DOE Identifies “Potentially Unrecoverable Quality Issue” at Hanford Waste Treatment Plant

More than 14% of Required Safety Documentation “Missing”

Richland, WA: The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) put one of its contractors—Bechtel National, Inc.—on notice that it must explain what DOE called a “potentially unrecoverable quality issue” at a multi-billion dollar waste processing facility at the Hanford Nuclear Site in an official letter released by the non-profit organization Hanford Challenge.

The Waste Treatment Plant is a facility being built to vitrify high-level nuclear waste currently stored at Hanford in southeastern Washington.

The March 6, 2018 letter from DOE’s Office of River Protection to Bechtel National, Inc., the prime contractor hired to design and build the Waste Treatment Plant (WTP) since 2000.

The letter, signed by DOE Federal Project Director William Hamel, states that DOE has “identified the quality records needed to demonstrate that the important-to-safety structural steel could perform its safety function were either missing or of indeterminate quality. This condition is a potentially unrecoverable quality issue.”

Earlier this week, DOE announced that Mr. Hamel, the author of the letter, was transferred from his position as Federal Project Manager to another part of the agency away from oversight duties at the Waste Treatment Plant.

The March 6th letter also stated that DOE also expressed concerns about other components such as rebar, hangers and piping not meeting safety requirements.

Internal documents obtained by Hanford Challenge indicate that approximately 14.4% of the required safety documents were missing from both the Low Activity Waste and Lab facilities.
DOE told Bechtel to promptly investigate the facts and circumstances surrounding the structural steel to “justify the continuation of work.” DOE also directed Bechtel to brief DOE within 14 days concerning the results of the investigation to determine the extent of condition, to provide a technical basis for continuation of procurement activities to justify continuing work.

“This could be a showstopper. We applaud new DOE leadership for finally holding the contractor’s feet to the fire on this critical issue of quality assurance, but I’m more interested in what happens next. For DOE to fix this, it must enforce a rigorous nuclear safety culture and put a new contractor in place that takes nuclear quality assurance seriously,” said Tom Carpenter, Executive Director, Hanford Challenge.

As early as 2010, internal experts blew the whistle on this exact issue. The response was to fire their own experts, including the Manager of Research and Technology, Dr. Walter Tamosaitis, and Manager of Environmental and Nuclear Safety Donna Busche. “As a result of the contractors’ actions, this extremely crucial multi-billion dollar facility is at serious risk of being scrapped,” said Carpenter.

If the structural steel and other components cannot meet rigorous safety standards for nuclear operations, the plant cannot be allowed to operate. Commercial nuclear plants have been canceled for not being able to prove the quality and workmanship of safety components.

“This is a serious programmatic failure. You can’t inspect in safety, you have to build it in – making sure that everything installed in this plant has the right pedigree. The contractor needs to prove that the source and quality of materials installed are validated and verified. You can’t fix this after the fact, you have to start over. The contractor failed and needs to be held accountable for this multi-billion dollar screw up,” said Carpenter.

The WTP project has been plagued with cost and schedule overruns almost since its inception in 2000. High-level management whistleblowers revealed numerous quality and technical flaws that would affect safety of the operations of the facility.

WTP was originally supposed to begin operations in 2007, at a cost to the government of $4.6 billion. However, design changes, mismanagement, and other factors, including the decision to “fast-track” the facility by using a much-criticized design/build approach, skyrocketed the projected costs to an estimated $26 billion, with an opening date of 2036. Hanford management recently promised to treat so-called “low activity” radioactive waste by 2022. This deadline already appears to be at risk, especially when read in context with this latest DOE letter.

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