

United States Senate
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May 10, 2007

The Honorable Samuel Bodman
Secretary
U.S. Department of Energy
1000 Independence Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20585

Dear Mr. Secretary,

In March 2006, I requested that the Inspector General of the Department of Energy conduct an investigation into complaints that equipment and control systems destined for use in the Nuclear Waste Treatment Plant at Hanford did not meet nuclear safety and quality standards. The Inspector General has just completed the first portion of this investigation concerning the plant's integrated control system. The Inspector General found that this system "...does not meet the stringent procedures, plans, specifications, or work practices associated with nuclear quality standards." For its part, the Department's contractor continues to insist that it has done nothing wrong and the proposed control system is acceptable. I am therefore requesting an explanation of what actions the Department intends to take in response to the Inspector General's findings.

The Inspector General's report quite clearly identifies a number of areas where the Department's contractor failed to establish adequate quality assurance requirements to ensure that the proposed control system met the Department's standards for nuclear activities. For example, the report states that the prime contractor – Bechtel National – had not made sure that subcontractors working on the system had appropriate quality assurance programs, had not clearly set forth the quality assurance standards the system was supposed to meet, and had not consistently applied those standards throughout the plant.

The report also concluded that the Department itself had not properly managed this activity and made sure that Bechtel National was meeting the Department's quality assurance standards. In fact, the report notes that the Department "...was unaware of the nuclear quality assurance standards issue prior to our review."

Unfortunately, this is just the latest example of serious management problems concerning the design and construction of this high-level waste treatment facility – a facility that is essential to the clean up of millions of gallons of high-level waste at the Hanford site. This facility is already being delayed approximately eight years until 2019 at a cost that has more than doubled – from \$5.8 billion estimated in 2003 to this year's estimate of \$12.3 billion. DOE still lacks a viable plan for more than half of the so-called low-activity waste that is supposed to be removed from the waste tanks and which also has to be vitrified.

Please describe what actions the Department will take to address the Inspector General's findings concerning the design and procurement of this control system and the Department's management of the Waste Treatment Facility. I look forward to your response at your earliest convenience. If you or your staff have any questions concerning this request, please contact David Berick of my staff at 202-224-5244.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ron Wyden". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Ron Wyden
United States Senator