

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

May 24, 2017

Mr. Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

We write to request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) initiate a review of the nuclear waste cleanup and environmental remediation work at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in the State of Washington, with a specific focus on work that must still be completed by the U.S. Department of Energy's (DOE) Richland Operations Office (RL). We were alarmed by the recent tunnel collapse at the Hanford site, and are concerned that future events could put the safety of workers, the public, and environment at risk. This event was another harsh reminder of the radioactive and toxic hazards that remain at the Hanford site, as well as the importance of ensuring the site has the resources necessary to expeditiously achieve its cleanup mission.

On May 9, 2017, workers on the Hanford site observed a sunken area over Tunnel 1 adjacent to the Plutonium-Uranium Extraction Plant (PUREX). Tunnel 1 contains 780 cubic yards of waste in eight rail cars, including highly radioactive materials and miscellaneous contaminated equipment. Following the initial discovery, DOE activated the Hanford Emergency Operations Center and found a 20 by 20 foot hole in Tunnel 1. First responders, DOE, and contractors were diligent and quick in their response, filling the hole with 53 truckloads of soil. DOE is now in the process of executing an interim plan to stabilize the tunnel to prevent future collapses.

Fortunately, the collapse did not result in any injuries and no measureable release of radioactive or toxic materials into the atmosphere or the surrounding environment. However, this event raises several questions concerning the cleanup of facilities like Tunnel 1 at PUREX within DOE's RL mission, which are not scheduled to be decontaminated and demolished in the near future. RL is responsible for all non-tank waste cleanup activities throughout the Hanford site, including soil and groundwater remediation, facility decontamination and decommissioning, stabilization and disposition of nuclear materials and spent fuel, and the disposition of non-tank waste. As work continues to complete cleanup along the Columbia River Corridor, a long list of cleanup activities remains outstanding on the Central Plateau, including remediation and demolition of more than 1,000 waste sites, 500 facilities, and contaminated soil and groundwater – much of which is highly contaminated with radioactive and toxic waste.

Given the importance of ensuring the safety of Hanford workers, the public, and environment we request that GAO review the following:

1. What methods has DOE employed to monitor the structural soundness of Tunnel 1 at PUREX since it was sealed in 1965? Please provide similar information for Tunnel 2 at

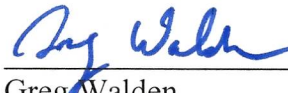
- PUREX. Further, what methods does DOE use to monitor other legacy infrastructure under the RL mission to ensure safety? Please include contaminated equipment, facilities, waste sites, groundwater, soil, and other non-tank waste units in this review.
2. What actions has DOE taken, or is planning to take, to improve monitoring of aging facilities to ensure structural stability and better evaluate the potential for safety risks to workers, the public, and environment? How does DOE hold its contractors accountable to ensure these facilities are monitored and maintained to a level that ensures there is no adverse risk to workers or release of radioactive or toxic materials? What actions has DOE taken to review contractor performance with regard to the recent tunnel collapse?
 3. What is the full scope of legacy infrastructure and non-tank waste within the RL mission requiring cleanup, but which is not currently being remediated? What is the timeline under which the remediation of these sites is currently scheduled to be completed? Please include contaminated equipment, facilities, waste sites, groundwater, soil, and other non-tank waste units in this review.
 4. How does DOE identify and determine the risks this legacy infrastructure and non-tank waste within the RL mission poses to workers, the public, and environment? Does DOE have an established mechanism by which it prioritizes this remediation work? Further, is there a unified remediation priority list among its two offices at the Hanford Site – RL and the Office of River Protection? Is there a unified remediation priority list across the entire national DOE environmental management complex?
 5. After DOE's immediate efforts to stabilize Tunnel 1 at PUREX, what are DOE's plans to remove the waste from and remediate Tunnel 1 and Tunnel 2 at PUREX? Has the collapse at Tunnel 1 altered DOE's plans for addressing such legacy infrastructure and non-tank waste sites within the RL mission, and what challenges does DOE face in this mission?

Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions concerning this request.

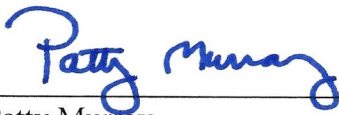
Sincerely,



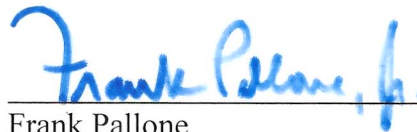
Maria Cantwell
Ranking Member, Senate Energy and
Natural Resources Committee



Greg Walden
Chairman, House Energy and Commerce
Committee



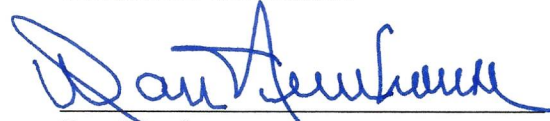
Patty Murray
United States Senator



Frank Pallone
Ranking Member, House Energy and
Commerce Committee



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Dan Newhouse
Member of Congress

Cathy McMorris Rodgers

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