

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 16, 2017

The Honorable Rick Perry  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Energy  
1000 Independence Avenue S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20585

Dear Secretary Perry:

During your confirmation process, we discussed the importance of the nuclear waste cleanup and environmental remediation work currently underway at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Washington state. A critical component of this mission is ensuring a safe work environment. We urge you to continue efforts began by Secretary Ernest Moniz to improve working conditions in the tank farms and address chemical vapor exposures. Nothing less than a complete commitment to safety at Hanford is acceptable.

One of the most challenging portions of the Hanford cleanup is the approximately 54.6 million gallons of nuclear and radioactive waste stored in 177 underground tanks. Chemicals in this waste create vapors that are released into the atmosphere ensuring the waste inside the tanks remains stable. In 2014 an independent review of chemical vapor exposures in and near tank farms at Hanford found that there was a “causal link between chemical vapor releases and subsequent health effects, particularly upper respiratory irritation, experienced by tank farm workers.”<sup>1</sup> Since then the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and the tank farm operations contractor, Washington River Protection Solutions (WRPS), have demonstrated a commitment to resolving the chemical vapor exposure issue, fully implementing the safety recommendations from the 2014 Hanford Tank Vapor Assessment Report, and deploying programs and new technologies to improve health and safety.

Additional chemical vapor exposures in 2016 resulted in three subsequent independent reviews which have been completed in recent months. A special report by the Office of the Inspector General examined whether employees at Hanford fear retaliation and assessed the status of actions underway by WRPS to implement the 2014 Hanford Tank Vapor Assessment Report recommendations.<sup>2</sup> The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health conducted a workplace safety and health evaluation of all workers and organizations that work within, or near, the tank farms focusing on four programmatic areas – exposure assessment, exposure controls, safety and health program management, and medical.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the Office of Enterprise

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<sup>1</sup> Savannah River National Laboratory, *Hanford Tank Vapor Assessment Report*, pg. 9 (Oct. 30, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Energy Office of the Inspector General, *Department of Energy's Actions to Address Worker Concerns Regarding Vapor Exposures at the Hanford Tank Farms*, OIG-SR-17-01 (Nov. 2016).

<sup>3</sup> National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, *Review of Hanford Tank Farm Worker Safety and Health Programs* (Nov. 28, 2016).

Assessments reviewed the progress on the 2014 Hanford Tank Vapor Assessment Report recommendations, specifically assessing the technical solutions and engagement with the workforce and medical personnel in developing and implementing the recommendations.<sup>4</sup>

Although these reports had different objectives, common themes are present in the concluding recommendations on communication and trust, the workers' compensation program, further improvements to the industrial hygiene program, additional engineering controls, and more worker involvement. We urge you to ensure DOE and WRPS implement the recommendations from these reports to better protect the workforce at Hanford. Specifically, we request DOE develop an implementation plan which includes a schedule and the funding necessary to complete these recommendations. DOE should also develop a mechanism through which the resulting safety improvements continue from one contractor to another. Further, it is clear that consistent oversight is a key component to improving safety. To achieve this we ask that DOE commit to annual reviews by the Office of the Inspector General and the Office of Enterprise Assessments of the health and safety practices at Hanford. During your confirmation hearing you stated "one of our most important duties is making sure those men and women who are working on a very dangerous site have the appropriate protection that they deserve and that they've earned." Implementing the recommendations from all three reports and committing to regular oversight at Hanford is an important step to provide the protection Hanford workers deserve.

We appreciate DOE's commitment to the safety and health of workers, and the actions already taken to improve conditions in the tank farms. It is paramount that these efforts continue under your Administration.

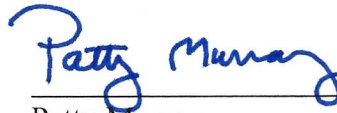
Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,



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Maria Cantwell  
United States Senator



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Patty Murray  
United States Senator

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Energy Office of Enterprise Assessments, *Follow-up Assessment of Progress on Actions Taken to Address Tank Vapor Concerns at the Hanford Site* (Jan. 2017).