



Department of Energy
Washington, DC 20585

HQO.870902
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SEP 0 1 1987

Honorable Al Swift
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Swift:

In accordance with my letter to you of August 14, 1987, enclosed is a data report summarizing the I-129 information available on the Hanford site, "Data Compilation: Iodine-129 in Hanford Groundwater."

Sincerely,

for Ben C. Busche
Ben C. Busche, Director
Office of Civilian Radioactive
Waste Management

Enclosure

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WM Project: WM-10
PDR w/encl
(Return to WM, 623-SS)

WM Record File: 101.
LPDR w/encl

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WHC-EP-0037

Data Compilation: Iodine-129 in Hanford Groundwater

Prepared for the U.S. Department of Energy
Assistant Secretary for Defense Programs



Westinghouse
Hanford Company Richland, Washington

Hanford Operations and Engineering Contractor for the
U.S. Department of Energy under Contract DE-AC05-87RL10930



Department of Energy
Washington, DC 20585

AUG 14 1987

Honorable Ron Wyden
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Mr. Wyden:

Thank you for your letter of August 4, 1987, to Secretary Herrington concerning information relating to the consideration of the Hanford site as a permanent high-level waste repository.

The Department of Energy is preparing a response to the issues raised in your letter. We regret that a final reply cannot be provided by your August 14 date; however, a response will be sent to you in two to three weeks. In the meantime, we will provide you with a data report summarizing all the I-129 information available on the Hanford site. This report is in final preparation and will be sent to you by August 21, 1987.

Sincerely,


Ben C. Rusche, Director
Office of Civilian Radioactive
Waste Management





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Ben C. Rusche, Director
Office of Civilian Radioactive
Waste Management



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

August 4, 1987

Hon. John Herrington
Secretary of Energy
Forrestal Building
1000 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20585

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We are concerned that employees of the Department or its contractors may have deliberately covered up information that may disqualify the Hanford site from being considered as a permanent high-level waste repository.

On April 28, 1987, at a hearing of the Energy and Commerce Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee, we learned that in the early 1970s, radioactive iodine 129 had been detected in samples from wells across the Columbia River from Hanford. Such contamination suggests that the deep aquifers, including possibly those that would surround a waste repository, are connected with the surface. Internal DOE documents criticized the Department for not further investigating the contamination.

On June 9, 1987, at the request of Chairman Dingell, the Inspector General provided the Subcommittee with an abstract of an investigation of an alleged coverup of this contamination. Specifically, it was alleged that:

(1) in 1984 an unknown employee of one of [Hanford's] prime contractors was chastised or administratively disciplined for discussing, during a formal presentation, the possibility that radioactive nuclides, and specifically Iodine 129 (I129 or I29I), produced on the Hanford Site by the Site's processes, were migrating to, and within, the aquifers located beneath the site.

(2) an unknown employee or group of employees was attempting to conceal information indicating that an "above background" level of I129 had been found in the aquifers located beneath the Hanford site and adjoining farmland.

The abstract indicated that the Inspector General received the allegations in May 1985. Apparently, two years later, when the abstract was sent to the subcommittee, the IG had reached no conclusion in the matter.

We have since learned that knowledge of the contamination dates at least to 1962, and that the Atomic Energy Commission, the Department's predecessor, may have had knowledge of contamination traveling beneath the Columbia as early as 1950.

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Hon. John Herrington

August 4, 1987

It appears to us that, at worst, there has been a deliberate cover up. At best, the Department has failed to include critical information in its evaluation of Hanford as a waste site.

We request that by August 14, 1987, you give us a report on the status and conclusions of the Inspector General's investigation, and that you promptly re-evaluate Hanford's status as a waste site. In particular, we request that, pursuant to 10 C.F.R. section 960.4-2-1(d), you disqualify Hanford from further consideration.

Sincerely,



RON WYDEN, M.C.



AL SWIFT, M.C.

AUG 6 1987

AI
Pg 1 of 2

Hanford officials killed water probe idea, scientist says

By Duff Wilson
and Angelo Bruscas
P-I Reporters

A Hanford scientist who proposed studies of iodine 129 contamination of ground water under the Hanford reservation three years ago was harassed by higher officials and ordered to drop the idea, he and a former associate said yesterday.

"I thought I was doing my job, and I took a lot of heat for it; I still don't know why it happened," said Vern Johnson, a hydrologist who has since changed companies and now is studying a proposed nuclear repository for Westinghouse Hanford.

Johnson suggested the studies in a closed-door seminar in the spring of 1984. At the time, he was employed by Rockwell Hanford, then the prime contractor at Hanford.

He said hostile reaction to his speech by high-ranking officials from Rockwell and the U.S. Department of Energy forced him to transfer from the environmental protection office to the repository study office. Johnson added that he wasn't hurt in salary or career development.

Some top officials "were absolutely furious," agreed Al Conklin, an environmental health physicist who occupied an office next to Johnson's at that time and used to answer the telephone for him during the height of the reaction.

"It sounded like there was a hidden agenda there that everyone was so furious about, and it just left the rest of us scratching our heads," said Conklin, who now works for the state Department of Social and Health Services.

Johnson and Conklin said they didn't find out until later that a 1978 study, which wasn't made public until last month, had already shown radioactive iodine seeping through aquifers far under the Columbia River.

Some state and federal officials say the information could rule out Hanford as a nuclear waste dump. The radioactive iodine does not appear to pose a health threat but acts as a tracer of ground water.

Officials say it might show contamination of deep aquifers, indicating that if Hanford were made a repository for the nation's nuclear waste, the radioactive material could seep into the ground water

See HANFORD, Page A6

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much faster than federal standards permit.

On Tuesday, U.S. Reps. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., and Al Swift, D-Bellingham, wrote Energy Secretary John Herrington to demand a full explanation of the alleged cover-up of data on iodine 129 as well as the alleged harassment of Johnson.

In Washington, D.C., and Washington state, experts on both sides of the repository issue are scrambling to react to the aquifer disclosures. In developments yesterday:

■ A Department of Energy spokesman said a team of Hanford workers is still compiling the previously unreleased studies of iodine 129.

They will make the data public within a month and might propose further work leading to a final review this fall of the proposal to make Hanford the national nuclear repository, spokesman Mike Talbot said.

State officials complained July 20 that the internal group had been prematurely disbanded. Talbot denied that. But Conklin said one of the group's own members told him they had indeed disbanded because Hanford officials did not want to "hang out their dirty laundry."

"Maybe they put it back together again in a hurry," Conklin said.

■ The inspector general of the Department of Energy concluded a two-year probe this spring by finding there was no intent to cover up iodine 129 data that was omitted from one key Hanford report, according to sources who have seen the still-secret report.

But the investigation was very narrow, comparing only two documents, and it did not resolve the broader questions of why the iodine disclosures were omitted from numerous later reports and environmental assessments of the Hanford site, said Conklin, who summarized the report in a June 30 memo.

The inspector general also studied charges Johnson had been threatened and harassed after his recommendation to study iodine 129 under Hanford. The conclusion was that there was no wrongdoing and that the hostile reaction was based on Johnson's manner, Conklin said.

"I recall the situation being much more tense," he added.

R.A. "Dick" Young, the agent who conducted the two-year probe for the inspector general, declined any comment yesterday.

Johnson agreed yesterday to talk with the Post-Intelligencer about his 1984 experience, a time when he was employed by Rockwell Hanford.

But he did not want to talk about his current work as a member of the internal group for Westinghouse Hanford, Rockwell's successor in charge of Hanford operations, unless higher officials approved.

Johnson said Westinghouse is much more open and seems to be making every effort now to clear up the questions about iodine 129 in aquifers.

Johnson said his immediate superior had approved his 1974 presentation calling for studies of iodine 129 movement from the plutonium-uranium extraction (PUREX) plant at the Hanford reservation.

It was the "doom and gloom manner" of Johnson's speech, instead of the content, that seemed to offend some higher officials, Conklin said. "He may have gone a bit overboard, but he was given too hard a time," Conklin said.

Johnson was lambasted by two former top Energy Department officials — F.R. Standerfer, director of defense waste programs, and Oscar Elgart, a Standerfer deputy — as well as his own supervisor's boss, Bruce Knight, who was at

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that time director of health and safety programs for Rockwell, Johnson and Conklin said.

"You wouldn't believe the language they used," said Conklin. He said Johnson was distraught and considered hiring a lawyer to protect his reputation.

"Why it was received in such a hostile manner by various groups is still a mystery to me," Johnson said. "Maybe it came across as negative. I get nervous when I talk in front of a lot of people, and sometimes I come across that way. It's not what I intended, but management reacted very negatively to it."

According to one Hanford document released last month, Johnson received a call from Elgert,

acting on orders from Standerfer, who said: "We do not want any studies regarding I-129 and PUREX. We do not want the (Nuclear Regulatory Commission) involved, and it would be a big mess. We do not want the visibility."

Elgert told the inspector general he did not recall making that call; Johnson said he is sure of it and that it was corroborated by Knight, who received a similar call.

Knight himself "was noticeably irritated because Standerfer was upset at the presentation," Johnson said.

The former officials could not be reached for comment. Knight, now working in Tennessee, did not return a telephone call yesterday. Talbot said Standerfer left the Energy Department for another job July 24, 1984, and Elgert retired June 1, 1986.

"Vern (Johnson) was a good man," said Conklin, who stayed on the environmental staff. "Very competent. A very perceptive hydrologist. We were extremely sorry to see this happen to him. We were mad as hell."

Johnson blamed the episode on "a certain mentality that was existing at the time, borne out of the defense production issues . . . in stark contrast to today and (more openness on repository) issues."

Johnson said he still gets two or three calls a year from department officials interested in his monitoring idea.

"So I think I got my message across," he said.

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Swift, Wyden demand release of iodine probe

By CHRIS CIVULA
Herald science writer

Two Pacific Northwest congressmen have called on the Department of Energy to produce the results of an inspector general's investigation into allegations of a deliberate attempt at Hanford to keep key environmental documents from the public.

Rep. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., and Rep. Al Swift, D-Wash., sent a letter late Tuesday to Energy Secretary John Herrington requesting the report by Aug. 14.

The inspector general launched an investigation in 1985 into allegations that individuals at Hanford attempted to cover up information about radioactive iodine in the ground water at the nuclear reservation.

The inspector general also investigated charges that a Rockwell Hanford employee was disciplined

for talking about the issue.

So far, more questions than answers surround the investigation. According to Swift and Wyden, the inspector general had drawn no conclusions after two years of investigation.

But in May, a copy of the report was made available to Robert Cook, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's representative assigned to Hanford's high-level nuclear waste repository program.

"The I.G. report indicated no problems with the previous hand-

ling of (the) information," Cook wrote in a memo to Robert E. Browning, director of the NRC's waste management division.

This week, DOE officials at Hanford issued a short statement based on a memo dated April 1 from the inspector general to Hanford Manager Mike Lawrence.

According to DOE's statement, the inspector general found no evidence to substantiate charges of a coverup or an attempt to discipline the worker for talking about the issue. At the inspector general's re-

Metro Northwest

quest, DOE declined a request Wednesday for a copy of the memo.

Both DOE and National Regulatory Commission officials have said they believed the inspector general's investigation was

WHAT THE LETTER SAID



Rep. Wyden

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Rep. Swift

cause the isotope has been found in extremely low levels.

However, one explanation for the presence of radioactive iodine in deep aquifers is that ground water travels between confined aquifers deep underground and the unconfined aquifer, which is near the surface and flows into the Columbia River.

If water travels between the aquifers, it could disqualify Hanford as a candidate for the nation's first high-level nuclear waste repository.

"We request ... that you promptly re-evaluate Hanford's status as a waste site," Wyden and Swift said.

"It appears to us that, at worst, there has been a deliberate coverup," the congressmen said. "At best, the department has failed to include critical information in its evaluation of Hanford as a waste site."

completed this spring, but a request for the report filed in May by the Tri-City Herald under the Freedom of Information Act has not yet been granted because the investigation is considered open.

The Richland office of the inspector general, which was responsible for conducting the investigation,

declined to answer questions about the report. It is the inspector general's policy to neither confirm nor deny the existence of investigations.

The data in question shows that traces of iodine 129 have been found deep underground at Hanford. The issue isn't considered an immediate health problem be-

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WM Record File

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Docket No.

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Distribution:

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TO: REB fm. J. Saetzman

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