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Congress of the United States

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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

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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 129I), 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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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.