

Fed asks for investigation on nuclear working conditions

April 18 -- The chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee joined with four other representatives in asking the investigative arm of Congress to examine working conditions at the Hanford Nuclear Waste Site in southeastern Washington state.

Rep. John Dingell, D-Mich., and the others have asked the Government Accountability Office to estimate the costs of repeated work stoppages at the site, and determine whether the Department of Energy contractors or taxpayers are funding those costs. The time period they want investigated covers Jan. 1, 2000 through March 15 of this year.

Dingell and fellow committee members Reps. Joe Barton, R-Texas, Bart Stupak, D-Mich., John Shimkus, R-Ill., and Jay Inslee, D-Wash., all signed the April 16 letter to Gene Dodaro, GAO's acting comptroller general.

The letter also asks GAO to assess whether these costs could have been avoided with more effective nuclear and worker safety oversight and better Energy Department management of its contractors. Bechtel National and CH2M Hill Hanford Group are listed as contractors at the waste treatment plant and tank farms.

As part of its cleanup, the DOE has begun building new waste treatment facilities and transferring hazardous materials to double-shell underground storage tanks. More than 55 million gallons of chemical, hazardous, and radioactive waste are stored at the site in 177 large underground tanks. That's enough to fill a football field to a depth of 150 feet.

DOE managers shut down operations or construction to address systemic safety problems. Examples cited in the letter include: an incident in 2004 where vapors sickened workers; a 26-month delay to make the work area earthquake-resistant; and an engineering failure in 2007 where 50 to 100 gallons of high-level waste leaked into a fresh water line.

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