Section 4

TRI-CITIES AND REGIONAL BACKGROUND

The Hanford Site has played a primary role in determining the Tri-Cities economic makeup. When Hanford's mission changes, the Tri-Cities feels the repercussions. A brief history of the community reveals the Tri-Cities' dependence on the Hanford Site for economic stability and growth. The history also reveals its vulnerabilities and strengths influencing present and future economic conditions.

In December 1942, scientists in Chicago conducted the first controlled nuclear chain reaction. In the race to develop nuclear weapons during World War II, this initial step provided America the knowledge needed to develop the atomic bomb. A site was needed to apply this new technology to weapons production. In January 1943, Hanford, north of Richland, was chosen by the Federal government as the site to build facilities to produce America's nuclear weapons.

To construct the facilities that would create the plutonium required for the world's first nuclear weapons, the Federal government acquired land, including the towns of Richland, Hanford, and White Bluffs. The Hanford Site became home to the world's first full-scale plutonium production plants. More than 1,500 Hanford residents were evacuated during the spring of 1943 to make way for construction.

Thousands of workers across the nation converged on the area in 1944 and 1945 to build these plants. The population swelled to 51,000 in a few months. The world's first three production plutonium reactors were built about 35 miles north of Richland, although at the time few knew their purpose. About two years after their construction started, Hanford produced plutonium for America's first nuclear detonation.

Following World War II, during the Cold War years, the Federal government continued to use the Hanford Site for nuclear weapons materials production. From 1943 to 1958, Richland was a government-owned town. Most Hanford workers lived in Richland. As a result, a large proportion of Richland's population consisted of skilled laborers and highly educated professionals in the upper-income brackets. This work force provided the Tri-Cities with a strong economic base.

In 1958, the citizens chose by popular vote to incorporate Richland as an independent city. Although freed from federal oversight of the municipal government, Richland's economic well-being remained dependent on Hanford.

By 1945, three plutonium production reactors were in operation at the Hanford Site. There were also facilities for the entire nuclear production cycle, including fuel fabrication, chemical processing, waste management, and research. In the mid-1960s, Hanford entered a period of decline. All eight of the single-purpose plutonium production reactors were closed between 1964 and 1971. Only the N Reactor, a dual-purpose reactor producing plutonium and electricity, remained in operation.

In the 1970s, the Hanford Site became a research center for peaceful uses of the atom and alternative energy sources. By 1975, energy research had become Hanford's major mission. Besides nuclear energy, solar, geothermal, fossil, wind, and organic energy sources were studied.

The Tri-Cities was one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the nation during the 1970s, with a population increase of 55 percent during that decade.

The growth of the 1970s was reversed in the 1980s. Starting in 1981, construction of the Washington Public Power Supply System plant WNP-4 was terminated, construction on plant WNP-1 was halted, and plans for additional power plants were canceled. About 11,000 construction jobs associated with building these plants were lost during that decade. In the late 1980s, the N Reactor was placed in cold standby, terminating another major Site project; and in 1987, the Basalt Waste Isolation Project was unexpectedly discontinued.

During the decline of the 1980s, the weaknesses of the Tri-Cities' reliance on Hanford were revealed. The severe cutbacks in Hanford jobs forced many highly-skilled nuclear technicians and construction workers to leave the Tri-Cities area. This cost the community a large portion of residents in the upper-income brackets. Though many left during downturns in the Tri-Cities economy, others chose to find alternative local employment and remain because of the high quality of life found in the Tri-Cities.

In 1991, USDOE announced N Reactor would be permanently shut down. Nearly 50 years of producing nuclear materials at the Hanford Site for America's defense had come to an end. Several Hanford areas were left contaminated by chemical and radioactive waste from the years of weapon production. This resulted in the present Hanford Site mission of environmental cleanup.

Thousands of jobs were added at the Hanford Site to support new and expanded environmental restoration and waste management activities. In 1994, Site employment peaked at approximately 18,000. Since that time, declining budgets and restructuring of work have reduced Site employment to about 10,000.

The ongoing science and technology mission at the Pacific Northwest National Laboratory provides another source of economic strength. The laboratory has approximately 3,500 employees engaged in a full range of science and technology programs.

The primary concern of the down river communities, such as Portland, Hood River, The Dalles, Vancouver and Umatilla, is the health of the Columbia River. The Columbia River serves as a source of irrigation for agriculture, as well as a key inland transportation route for commerce. The down river communities use the river as a recreational asset for boating, fishing, and other water activities. The River provides important agricultural, fishing and other natural resources vital to the economy of the communities and the states of Washington and Oregon. The down river communities general position on Hanford cleanup is the treatment of groundwater must continue, the waste in the tanks must be removed and treated, and other major cleanup projects must be completed to protect the Columbia River.