

The logo for DOE NEWS. The letters 'DOE' are in a large, blue, serif font, and 'NEWS' is in a smaller, blue, serif font to the right. The text is set against a background of horizontal blue lines.

DOE NEWS

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RADIOACTIVE SLUDGE REMOVED FROM HANFORD BASIN

The Department of Energy (DOE) will meet its commitment to state and federal regulators to complete movement of radioactive sludge out of the K East Reactor Basin, located about 400 yards from the Columbia River at the Hanford Site in Washington State.

Commitments under the Tri-Party Agreement among the DOE, Washington State Department of Ecology and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and to the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board call for DOE to transfer all of the estimated 42 cubic yards (32 cubic meters) of sludge out of the reactor's spent fuel pool by May 31.

“This is an incredible achievement on a project that has seen a number of very difficult challenges,” said DOE Richland Operations Office Manager Keith A. Klein. “Turning things around took ingenuity, commitment and teamwork. With the spent fuel, debris and sludge out of K East, we can turn our attention to removing the water and ensuring this basin will never again be a risk to the Columbia River.”

The highly radioactive sludge is a combination of dirt, sand, corrosion products, sloughed concrete from the basin walls, and/or fission products that formed throughout the years of underwater spent fuel storage.

DOE contractor Fluor Hanford began vacuuming sludge from the basin floor and consolidating it in underwater containers in the basin in October 2004, with the bulk of the work finished last October. Workers developed specialized tools for vacuuming the sludge and removed some 170 tons of debris to make consolidating the sludge easier.

To avoid radiological hazards, workers stood on grates suspended above the 20-foot-deep basin and manipulated equipment at the end of long poles while using underwater cameras to guide their efforts.

As soon as the bulk of the sludge was vacuumed into underwater containers in the K East Basin, workers began pumping the sludge through a specially designed pipeline to underwater engineered containers in the K West Basin, about a half mile away. Unlike the K East basin, K West basin has not leaked and its engineered containers will provide a secondary barrier to the environment and radiation shielding until a sludge treatment system is built on site to process the sludge for ultimate disposal.

“We worked hard to adapt to changing, challenging conditions to finish this demanding project,” said Pete Knollmeyer, vice president of the K Basins Closure Project for contractor Fluor Hanford. “Seeing the sludge transferred into the K West Basin, while maintaining one of the best safety records on site, is a real testament to our workers’ talent and dedication. Now we can get on with preparations to remove the K East Basin itself and clean up the underlying soil that was contaminated by past leaks.”

"This is an important step toward getting radioactive sludge treated and sent off-site for final safe disposal. Achieving this milestone will allow us to pursue cleanup of past leaks from the basin in order to restore this area and protect the Columbia River."

Larry Gadbois, K Basins Project Manager with the EPA.

Cleanup plans call for removing contamination from the concrete walls and floors of the K East Basin and draining the basin water, after which DOE and its contractor will tear down the facility and remove underlying soil that was contaminated by water leaks from the basin in the 1970s and the 1990s.

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