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ONE HUNDRED TENTH CONGRESS

U.S. House of Representatives
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Washington, DC 20515-6115

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April 16, 2008

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Mr. Gene L. Dodaro
Acting Comptroller General
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

Between 1943 and 1989, the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) and its predecessor agencies produced nuclear materials, including weapons-grade plutonium for the Manhattan Project, at its Hanford site in southeastern Washington State.

Decades of nuclear weapons production left a legacy of chemical, hazardous, and radioactive wastes. Currently, more than 55 million gallons of this dangerous waste are held in 177 large underground storage tanks at the Hanford site—an amount large enough to fill an area the size of a football field to a depth of 150 feet. In addition to building new waste treatment facilities, DOE has begun the process of transferring hazardous materials from leaking single-shell tanks to double-shell tanks as part of its ongoing cleanup efforts.

In carrying out these activities, DOE and its contractors are charged with maintaining adequate health and safety standards for their workers. Unlike the remainder of the nuclear industry, DOE self-regulates its contractors' worker and nuclear safety.

When major incidents occurred, or when major design weaknesses were identified, DOE management declared, in some cases, a "stand-down" of operations or construction in order to address systemic safety problems. The following are examples of such stand-downs.

- In early 2004, a stand-down was ordered and waste transfers were ceased after many employees became ill from exposure to vapors coming out of the high-level waste tanks in the Tank Farm. It was determined that the industrial hygiene program was flawed and management failed to provide adequate protections for tank farm workers.
- In early 2005, DOE ordered a construction stand-down at the Waste Treatment Plant after the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board found that the project was not adequately

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engineered to withstand seismic risks. DOE directed Bechtel to slow down or stop construction activities on two facilities affected by changing earthquake protection requirements—the pretreatment facility and the high-level waste treatment facility—resulting in a 26-month delay and an estimated cost of \$750 to \$900 million.

- In July 2007, the tank farm contractor's efforts to unclog a pump resulted in high-level waste being forced up a fresh water line. The line ruptured and leaked between 50–100 gallons of waste. A stand-down and a design review were ordered to correct the engineering failures in the high-level waste pumping systems.

When these stand-downs occur, it is our understanding that DOE usually picks up the tab for any cost overruns. Poor contractor performance and failure to adhere to nuclear safety and other requirements, however, contributed to these stand-downs/slowdowns. Cost and schedule increases might have been avoided had there been more effective regulation by DOE. The Committee is assessing whether DOE's contractors should be held financially accountable for the costs of any schedule delays and cost overruns due to their failure to adhere to nuclear safety and other requirements.

To better understand the cost implications of work stoppages resulting from inadequate worker safety protections and weaknesses in nuclear safety, design, oversight, and management at the Hanford Waste Treatment Plant and Tank Farms, we request that you prepare a report which:

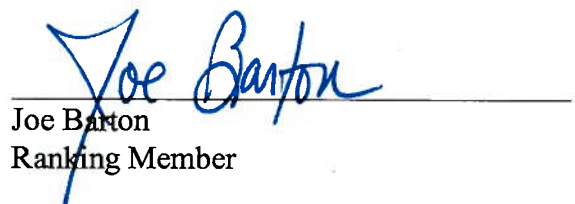
1. Identifies, defines, and quantifies the duration, scope, and number of employees affected by all stand-downs occurring between January 1, 2000, and March 15, 2008;
2. Estimates the costs of stand-downs—identifying the portion of costs paid by the contractor and by the taxpayer; and
3. Assesses whether these stand-downs would have been avoidable with more effective DOE nuclear and worker safety regulation.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. If you have any questions about this request, please have a member of your staff contact Mr. Richard Miller of the Committee Majority staff at (202) 226-2424, or Mr. Alan Slobodin of the Committee Minority staff at (202) 225-3641.

Sincerely,



John D. Dingell
Chairman

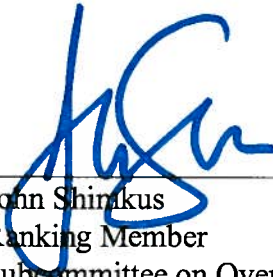


Joe Barton
Ranking Member

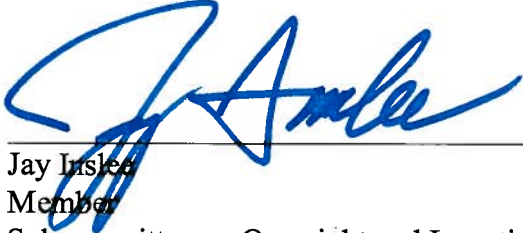
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Chairman
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations



John Shimkus
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations



Jay Inslee
Member
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations