

Hanford Concerns Council open for business

This story was published Tuesday, June 28th, 2005

By Annette Cary, Herald staff writer

An unusual partnership between a Hanford contractor and one of its critics, the Government Accountability Project, has led to an independent council to resolve employee concerns at the Hanford tank farms.

Tank farm workers have attributed health problems to exposure to chemical vapors that vent into the air from Hanford's older tanks of radioactive and hazardous chemical waste.

The new Hanford Concerns Council, which began operating Monday, will consider complex employee concerns about workplace safety, health and environmental protection at the tank farms.

CH2M Hill Hanford Group, the Department of Energy contractor for the tank farms, has agreed to implement any consensus recommendations of the council as long as it does not violate legal or contractual obligations.

"This agreement is the bedrock upon which the process rests," according to a memo sent to all CH2M Hill employees Monday by the contractor, the whistleblower-protection-group GAP and DOE.

The council will be led by Jonathan Brock, a professor at the University of Washington's Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs. The council also will include three representatives of CH2M Hill, three advocates for worker concerns and three neutral members.

"I have great confidence this will be a new and effective remedy for certain workers at the tank farms," said Tom Carpenter, director of GAP's Nuclear Oversight Program.

GAP criticized CH2M Hill last year for not better protecting workers from exposure to chemical vapors and not understanding what chemicals are in the vapors.

A series of government investigations that followed found that too little was known to be sure workers had not been harmed. CH2M Hill has taken steps to protect workers, such as requiring supplied-air ventilators to be worn near many older tanks.

Despite CH2M Hill's best efforts, there remained employees who believe their concerns were not being heard or that they were not being listened to with respect, said Ed Aromi, president of CH2M Hill.

GAP and CH2M Hill came up with the idea for the council together based on the success of a previous program and together approached DOE for its support.

The new council will operate much like the Hanford Joint Council, which resolved Hanford employee concerns from 1994 to 2003. During those years, the council accepted about 50 cases, reached consensus on all of them and had all its recommendations implemented by the contractors involved.

That council was formed when Westinghouse Hanford Co. operated the Hanford site and employed about 11,000 workers. But when the Westinghouse contract ended, the council lost contractor support and clout and eventually dissolved.

The new Hanford Concerns Council will hear the unresolved concerns of only CH2M Hill workers initially, but organizers are hoping its success will interest other contractors in using the council.

It's intended to be a forum to allow issues that might otherwise end up in the courts and remain unresolved for years to be settled through discussion in a two- to four-month process.

The council is expected to cost taxpayers \$500,000 annually, which includes an office and small staff.

Brock, who also was the chairman of the past Hanford council, said in 1999 that cases were being resolved at an average cost of \$33,000. But if they had gone to court and through subsequent appeals as whistleblower cases, they could reach \$500,000 to \$1 million in costs for legal fees, settlements and time lost by employees working on the case.

Cases then were being resolved in four to six months compared with about three to 10 years for whistleblower disputes to go through

the courts.

The new council has the support of Washington Gov. Christine Gregoire and U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash.

"Its existence will enhance both accountability for the site and dignity for workers," Gregoire said in a prepared statement and urged other companies to participate.

Murray called the council "exemplary and critical step forward for workers, the community and the environment."

"Instilling an enduring, safety-conscious work culture at the Hanford tank farms is one of my major goals," said Roy Schepens, manager of DOE's Office of River Protection. "I see the work of the concerns council as a key contributor in the attainment of this goal."

Board members filling employee advocacy positions are Carpenter; Lea Mitchell, an investigator with GAP; and Todd Martin, a consultant best known as the chairman of the Hanford Advisory Board. Alternate is Dana Gold, director of the Center on Corporations, Law & Society at Seattle University School of Law.

Neutral representatives are Max Power, retired from the Washington State Department of Ecology; Christine Spieth, a former organized labor official; and Harry Thomas, retired executive director of the Seattle Housing Authority.

The council is not intended to replace normal channels available for employees to receive help, such as their manager or the Employee Concerns Program. Rather it's intended for situations in which an employee questions whether regular channels can be fair or effective or if they risk retaliation or other negative impacts.

Workers may contact the new council through its Web site at www.hanfordconcernscouncil.org.

Get the entire Tri-City Herald delivered to you at home - [subscribe now](#).

Call 509-586-2138 or 800-750-4967

6 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Monday-Friday

7-12:00 p.m. Saturdays

7-10:30 a.m. Sundays and holidays

© 2007 Tri-City Herald, Associated Press & Other Wire Services