

Parties call Hanford Concerns Council a success

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By Annette Cary, Herald staff writer

The Department of Energy and one of its critics, the Government Accountability Project, have found something they can agree upon: The value of the Hanford Concerns Council.

Both are pleased with the benefits they've seen from the council started two years ago to mediate disputes between Hanford workers and DOE contractor CH2M Hill Hanford Group.

The council was formed during a time of "discord and mistrust" over safety at the Hanford tank farms, according to the council's description in its first progress report.

Extensive changes have since been made there, but several years ago workers feared that vapors vented to the air from underground tanks holding radioactive and hazardous chemical waste were harming their health.

The Government Accountability Project, or GAP, criticized CH2M Hill for not better protecting workers from exposure to the chemical vapors and not understanding what chemicals were in the vapors.

All three cases the council has received stemmed from that era at CH2M Hill, and all three were resolved earlier this year through a consensus of the council, said Jonathan Brock, chairman of the council and a professor at the University of Washington's Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs. Details of the cases and names have not been made public.

The cases were more complex than expected because of the medical issues involved, Brock said.

The council was modeled after the Hanford Joint Council, which resolved Hanford employee concerns from 1994 to 2003. But those cases typically involved safety, rather than medical, issues that were less complicated and could be resolved within four to six months.

In contrast, Hanford whistleblower cases that have gone to court have taken three years to a decade or more to settle.

By using the concerns council, people have a chance to be heard by a neutral agency, have the issues they care about addressed and are "brought back into a constructive and positive view of the site," Brock said.

The Hanford Concerns Council has seats for three representatives from CH2M Hill, three worker advocates and three independent experts. CH2M Hill agreed when the council was formed to implement any consensus recommendations of the council as long as it does not violate legal or contractual obligations.

CH2M Hill has fixed issues as they have come up without keeping employees waiting until cases are resolved, Brock said. That has included changing processes or making sure than practices are fully understood by employees.

"CH2M Hill has done a dramatic turnaround" since its handling of vapor exposure cases in 2003, said Tom Carpenter, director of GAP's Nuclear Oversight Program.

Agreeing to resolve cases through the council was "an act of faith and trust" by CH2M Hill and it has worked out well," he said.

GAP encourages employees to raise concerns, but they should not have to lose their careers or face reprisals to get issues

addressed, he said.

In the three cases resolved by the Hanford Concerns Council, employees who wanted to continue working had their career trajectory restored, Brock said.

The council has many options for resolving cases, starting with determining whether the work environment is safe, Brock said. Problems can be corrected or the employee shown why working conditions already were safe.

If an employee has missed a promotion because of the issue or disagreement with management, the council can recommend that it be given retroactively. The council also can set the record straight to ensure the worker gets fair treatment in disability or other benefit claims.

"I see the council as a big asset for us," said Shirley Olinger, acting manager of the DOE Hanford Office of River Protection. "It provides an employee with yet another avenue if they don't believe their issue is resolved appropriately. It provides an avenue that's objective."

With no pending cases before the council now, it is working on identifying safety issues that can help improve the safety culture at the Hanford tank farms.

CH2M Hill is the only contractor participating in the council, but GAP encourages other Hanford contractors to join. The council is set to continue until CH2M Hill's contract with DOE expires, which will be Oct. 1, 2008.

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