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Hanford Concerns Council expands mediation

By Annette Cary, Herald staff writer

More Hanford workers can turn to the independent Hanford Concerns Council to have issues mediated with the announcement Tuesday that a second contractor is joining the council.

Washington Closure Hanford, which is cleaning up the nuclear reservation along the Columbia River, has agreed to have employee concerns about safety, health and environmental hazards mediated by the council.

About 65 percent of work under the Department of Energy contract is assigned to subcontractors, and employees of both Washington Closure and also its subcontractors may bring concerns to the council without fear of losing their jobs.

"By working through the council system, the employee is protected, safety is advanced for co-workers and the projects stay on track," said Jon Brock, chairman of the council and a University of Washington professor.

The council takes cases that an employee does not believe can be fairly resolved through other channels, such as a manager, human resource department, labor relations or the Department of Energy or contractor employee concerns program. It also takes cases that may be too complex to be handled well by traditional methods or that have left workers and management polarized.

Washington Closure volunteered to join the council with the support of DOE. Since Chuck Spencer was named president of Washington Closure in early 2007, he's worked to create a safety culture in which workers feel free to raise concerns.

The council is modeled after the Hanford Joint Council, which resolved Hanford employee concerns from 1994 until 2003. CH2M Hill pushed to resurrect the council and give it a broader scope until the Hanford Concerns Council was formed three years ago with CH2M Hill, DOE and the Government Accountability Project as partners.

Although CH2M Hill will be replaced as the tank farm contractor Oct. 1, new contractor Washington River Protection Solutions also intends to join the council, said Jerry Holloway, spokesman for the contractor.

The council has settled three tank farm cases, all stemming from years when workers questioned whether their health was being damaged by chemical vapors that vented from underground tanks holding millions of gallons of radioactive waste.

The council also has six active cases and is looking at some broader issues, Brock said. Most of the tank farm cases have medical issues involved and the council has worked to make sure that workers get confidential and appropriate medical evaluations, he said.

The council costs taxpayers about \$500,000 annually. But it handles cases that typically would end up in the courts, such as the pipefitter lawsuit against Fluor Federal Services, said Tom Carpenter, director of Hanford Challenge and a founder of the council under the Government Accountability Project. That case has dragged on since the 1997 incident that triggered it, has interrupted careers of several workers and managers, and has a \$4.8 million jury award to workers under appeal.

"It is not a good thing to resolve employee concerns in an adversarial process," Carpenter said. The council's emphasis is on resolving problems, not on figuring out who said what to whom, he said.

The council assesses issues and then agrees on a solution through the consensus of all its members. Washington Closure then will implement the recommendations, Spencer said.

Washington Closure will have three members on the council, who will consider issues with three members serving as independent worker advocates and three neutral members with experience in dispute resolution.

"The process produces a new and complete assessment of the situation and a full, fair and final resolution," Brock said in a message to Washington Closure employees.

Employees wanting more information are being directed to www.hanfordconcernscouncil.org or may call 783-5695.