
Council ensures that mediation beats litigation

If you've never heard of the Hanford Concerns Council, that's sort of the idea.

The organization has only one item on its agenda -- resolve worker grievances over health, safety or the environment before they blow up.

If your future is at Washington Closure Hanford or Washington River Protection Solutions, it's a name you'll want to remember.

When process works - 100 percent of the time, so far -- problems get fixed without a lot of painful exposure for either side of the dispute.

We have some concerns about the potential to game the system to hide problems that threaten public health and safety, but adequate safeguards appear to be in place.

And for taxpayers, as well as everyone else involved, mediation is almost always better than litigation.

Chuck Spencer, president of Washington Closure Hanford, made a smart decision to join the council. It will strengthen his emphasis on improving safety.

Washington River Protection Solutions, through one of its major partners, CH2M Hill, is already connected.

The ideal, of course, is to have a work force that is comfortable using the normal channels to address concerns and a company that is adept at resolving them.

Indeed, most problems at Hanford are handled that way. But sometimes, despite best efforts, it doesn't work out.

When it doesn't, the costs -- which wind up passed through to the taxpayer -- can be enormous.

One lawsuit filed by a group of pipefitters against Fluor Federal Services is still running up attorney fees nearly a dozen years after the incident that triggered it.

Even if the pending appeal is successful in overturning the \$4.8 million jury award to the workers, the price tag to end the dispute will still have run in the millions by the time it's over.

The few cases that reach the council appear likely headed to litigation without intervention.

In the three years since it was resurrected by CH2M Hill, the council has a perfect record derailing potential lawsuits.

It isn't usually the first stop on the grievance train, but so far it has been the last.

The approximately \$500,000 annual cost to run the council seems like a bargain compared to the alternative.

The rest of Hanford's contractors ought to volunteer for the program, and it does have to be voluntary.

Council members say Fluor's forced participation years ago proved the hard way that the mediation process only works when all involved want to make it succeed.

It takes some open-minded thinking to bring company officials, advocates, neutral observers and government officials together for problem-solving sessions.

It may seem like a loss of control, but neither side waives any rights, and both workers and their employers must agree to any resolution before it's adopted.

Bechtel National, CH2M Hill Plateau Remediation Co. and the yet-to-be-selected Mission Support contractor shouldn't be afraid to get on board.

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