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SAFETY OF HANFORD WASTE TANKS ENHANCED THROUGH NEW CONTROLS

The U.S. Department of Energy and Westinghouse Hanford Company have placed additional management controls on Hanford's underground radioactive waste storage tanks.

Hanford was established during the Second World War to produce plutonium for America's nuclear weapons. All weapons material production was halted in the late 1980s and the site is now engaged in the world's largest environmental cleanup project.

The controls follow a DOE decision declaring an Unreviewed Safety Question relating to dry organic nitrate chemicals in some of the tanks. The presence of the chemicals has been well known but new analyses determined accident scenarios in some of the 177 underground waste storage tanks once thought impossible, may be possible under special circumstances.

An Unreviewed Safety Question means certain accident scenarios have not been fully evaluated and that management of the waste or work procedures must be enhanced to ensure safety.

When accident scenarios were last reviewed in 1989, waste fires from several postulated accidents were not viewed as possible. These included lightening strikes, gasoline reaching the waste from a ruptured vehicle tank, and hot debris entering the tanks caused by welding or grinding activities.

"Our management of the waste continues to improve as we gain new information. The more we learn about our waste the better we are able to manage it safely," said Ami Sidpara, director of Tank Farm Operations for DOE.

DOE has reviewed its management of the waste tanks and has confirmed that the steps needed to protect against any problems are already in place. As an added precaution, when vehicles are operating within the tank farms with the intent of going over the tank areas, spotters are in constant communication with the driver to prevent the vehicle from backing over any obstacles.

"If further actions are required, we will provide direction to Westinghouse promptly. In the meantime, we are confident this issue will not impact our scheduled work," continued Sidpara.

Westinghouse is the management and operations contractor on the U.S. Department of Energy's 560-square-mile Hanford Site and is responsible for safe storage of the waste until it can be prepared for disposal.

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