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*For more information contact: Erik Olds (DOE) -
(509) 372-8656*

Michael Turner (FHI) - (509) 376-2472

HOT TESTING BEGINS IN HANFORD'S SPENT NUCLEAR FUEL PROJECT

Hanford's Spent Nuclear Fuel (SNF) Project is "hot testing" fuel removal equipment at the K-West Basin using radioactive spent fuel assemblies. Hot testing follows several months of "cold testing" - using pieces of pipe to simulate highly radioactive spent N Reactor fuel assemblies stored underwater in the K-West Basin.

The K-West Basin is one of two indoor water pools near the Columbia River storing 2,100 metric tons of spent nuclear fuel, in addition to sludge and debris. Hanford will begin moving the spent fuel away from the Columbia River to a state-of-the-art storage facility in November 2000.

"This project is the corner stone of our plan to restore the Columbia River Corridor," said Phil Loscoe, Director of the Office of Spent Nuclear Fuel for the U.S. Department of Energy's Richland Operations Office (DOE). "We need to exercise these systems now with real spent fuel in order to have safe and continuous removal operations."

Cold and hot testing are part of a Phased Start-Up initiative, which allows SNF workers to find and fix any glitches in the complex systems prior to the movement of spent nuclear fuel. In the current hot testing program, up to 24 fuel canisters, containing 14 fuel assemblies each, will be emptied, and the fuel will be washed and sorted on an underwater table using remotely operated fuel handling and washing equipment. The intact fuel will be placed in new, stainless steel baskets fabricated for long-term storage. Fuel elements that break apart during handling will be placed back into the canisters so testing can proceed on undamaged fuel. The loaded fuel baskets will not be placed inside Multi-Canister Overpacks -large stainless steel containers -for drying and storage until spent fuel removal operations begin.

"The initiation of hot testing is a big victory, not only for the Spent Nuclear Fuel Project, but for the Hanford Site as a whole," said Dave Van Leuven, Fluor Hanford, Inc. Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer. "We're really making progress toward moving this spent fuel away from the river. I'm proud of the efforts of each member of our team."

DOE and its contractors are restoring the Columbia River corridor by moving spent nuclear fuel, "cocooning" reactors, addressing waste sites and groundwater contamination, and disposing of aging and unneeded buildings.

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Historical Note: The U.S. Department of Energy's Richland Operations Office manages the Hanford Site in southeastern Washington State. Hanford was established during World War II as part of the top secret Manhattan Project to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons. Weapons material production was halted in the late 1980s. The Hanford Site is now engaged in the world's largest cleanup effort to deal with the legacy of radioactive and hazardous wastes that resulted from the plutonium production era. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Washington Department of Ecology regulate Hanford's cleanup program under a long-term compliance contract called the Tri-Party Agreement. This agreement sets the framework and timelines on the cleanup work so that Hanford meets environmental standards. Hanford cleanup is focused on three outcomes: restoring the Columbia River Corridor for other uses, transitioning the Central Plateau to long term waste treatment and storage, and preparing for the future.

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For questions or comments about this page, please send email to [Theodore E Erik Olds@rl.gov](mailto:Theodore_E_Erik_Olds@rl.gov)