



News Release

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PROPOSAL TO ELIMINATE NEW HANFORD LABORATORY REJECTED BY ECOLOGY DIRECTOR

OLYMPIA -- The state has rejected a proposal by the U.S. Department of Energy to use commercial laboratories for Hanford cleanup testing rather than build a new lab at the Central Washington nuclear facility.

"Dependable, accurate and timely testing of radioactive and chemical wastes is a crucial element in cleaning up the Hanford site," said Washington Department of Ecology Director Chuck Clarke. "Testing problems can result in significant delays in projects to clean up the wastes at Hanford and bring the site into compliance with environmental laws."

Clarke said commercial laboratories around the nation have experienced many problems with timely and accurate analysis of samples in recent years, including work done at the Hanford site.

Energy had agreed to build a low-level mixed waste laboratory on the Hanford site as part of the Hanford cleanup agreement signed by Energy, Ecology and the federal Environmental Protection Agency in 1989. The laboratory was to be completed by January, 1992. Instead, Energy proposed a change in the agreement to substitute use of commercial laboratories. Energy proposed building a smaller laboratory on the Hanford site to perform "quality assurance" checks on the commercial laboratory results.

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"I cannot agree to the changes....," Clarke said in a letter to Energy officials. "I am firmly convinced that construction and operation of the laboratory should proceed. Constructing dedicated laboratory capacity at Hanford will allow DOE to prioritize work and will help to ensure the analytic capability is available and sustained."

Under the 1989 cleanup agreement, disagreements between Energy and Ecology over hazardous waste activities are settled through a dispute resolution process. The director of the Department of Ecology makes the final administrative decision in such disputes. The director's decision may then be appealed to the State Pollution Control Hearings Board or court.

Clarke noted that Energy's proposal to not build the facility seemed to come from a desire to "privatize" some cleanup and environmental compliance activities and to reduce the Hanford cleanup budget requirements for 1992.

"There were no technical problems or uncertainties with the laboratory construction," Clarke said. "There was no doubt that the laboratory capability would continue to be needed for Hanford cleanup for many years into the future and Congress had appropriated the funds for the construction of the laboratory."

Clarke said Energy's proposal to use private laboratories did not include any assurances that testing would be done in a timely manner.

"Under the Energy plan, we would have no laboratory and no assured turnaround times either," he said. "Basically, the proposal would not give us the assurances we need."

Clarke has asked Phil Hamric, acting manager for Energy's Richland Operations Office, to list steps that will be taken to construct the laboratory.