

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20510

November 21, 2014

The Honorable Ernest Moniz
Secretary
U.S. Department of Energy
1000 Independence Avenue S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20585

Dear Secretary Moniz:

We write to call on the Department of Energy (DOE) to take immediate action to protect the workforce at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Washington state by implementing the recommendations of the Hanford Tank Vapor Assessment Report (Report) without delay. Nothing less than a complete commitment to safety at Hanford is acceptable.

We understand that chemicals in the nuclear waste stored in single shell and double shell tank farms creates vapors that are vented into the atmosphere through various measures and that this tank breathing process ensures the waste inside the tanks remains stable. However, we owe the men and women who work in the tank farms the highest safety standards to protect them from these hazards.

Since March, we have closely followed the chemical vapor exposures experienced by 55 workers inside or near the single shell and double shell tank farms. We have engaged with all levels of DOE, its contractor, and our constituents to determine the reason for the exposures, their impact, and the precautions necessary to protect the workforce. While we are pleased that the Savannah River National Laboratory (SRNL) was quickly tasked to lead a review of current chemical vapors practices and make recommendations to minimize worker exposure and increase protections, it is now time for DOE to take swift and definitive actions to implement the recommendations within the Report.

This new, in-depth analysis of workforce experiences, record reviews, site visits, engineering data, and computational modeling by a panel of independent experts found that there is a “causal link between chemical vapor releases and subsequent health effects, particularly upper respiratory irritation, experienced by tank farm workers.”¹ It further found that the “adverse health effects are likely caused by acute, transitory exposures to relatively high concentrations of chemicals.”² While the Report highlights that DOE and its contractor have industrial hygiene (IH) programs in place to protect against long-term health effects based on cumulative or ongoing chemical vapor exposures and on the Occupational Exposure Limit,³ the Report clearly outlines that the “current program is not designed to detect and is incapable of detecting and

¹ Savannah River National Laboratory, “Hanford Tank Vapor Assessment Report,” October 30, 2014, Page 9.

² Savannah River National Laboratory, “Hanford Tank Vapor Assessment Report,” October 30, 2014, Page 13.

³ Savannah River National Laboratory, “Hanford Tank Vapor Assessment Report,” October 30, 2014, Page 17.

quantifying this type of transient exposure event”⁴ and “cannot adequately address the complex and episodic nature of the Hanford tank vapor incidents.”⁵

Given this Report, we urge DOE to fully recognize the shortfalls within the existing IH programs and address them immediately. The Report makes 10 overarching recommendations and 46 supporting recommendations to improve the IH programs to better detect chemical vapors, control them, and protect the workforce today and into the future. We appreciate that DOE and its contractor have already begun implementing certain recommendations; however, it is critical that DOE continue to move forward with implementing the remaining recommendations as quickly as possible.

According to the Report and our communication with DOE and its contractor since its release, an implementation plan responding to the recommendations is forthcoming and will be reviewed by the SRNL panel to validate the plan and ensure the recommendations are implemented correctly and effectively. When will this implementation plan be completed? In addition to addressing the recommendations, we request that the implementation plan include a clear schedule for the near-, mid-, and long-term recommendations and the resources necessary to carry them out successfully. Furthermore, we encourage you to add a specific line item into the Fiscal Year 2016 budget request and beyond to ensure funding for the implementation plan. DOE should also clearly outline a “process to monitor, document, and report progress and assure continuous improvement”⁶ as recommended by the Report. Finally, we urge DOE to institutionalize the improvements in workforce safety that result from this process, to ensure that lessons learned and best practices gained continue from contractor to contractor.

We appreciate your commitment to this matter, the actions you have already taken, and we urge you to take the steps necessary to not only improve the working conditions for workers in the tank farms today, but also for those who will work at Hanford in the future.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

Sincerely,



Patty Murray
United States Senator



Maria Cantwell
United States Senator



Adam Smith
Member of Congress

⁴ Savannah River National Laboratory, “Hanford Tank Vapor Assessment Report,” October 30, 2014, Page 17.

⁵ Savannah River National Laboratory, “Hanford Tank Vapor Assessment Report,” October 30, 2014, Page 15.

⁶ Savannah River National Laboratory, “Hanford Tank Vapor Assessment Report,” October 30, 2014, Page 16.