US officials cover up evidence of radioactive leak in Washington

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Internal emails obtained by a Seattle news station show that the US Department of Energy (DOE) and a private contractor in charge of managing the radioactive waste at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation deliberately suppressed evidence of a leak in one of the main holding tanks. Over the course of a year, numerous red flags were ignored and the public was lied to. *KING 5 News* broke the story last week, exposing the DOE for withholding information about a leak. The leak was conclusively discovered in a double-shelled tank last August but the public was not informed until October 22, 2012.

Between determining the leak existed and announcing it, the DOE lied to several public meetings about the origin and toxicity of unexpected radioactive materials found in the outer shell of tank 241-AY-102.

Last September, DOE tank farm manager Tom Fletcher told a meeting of the government-chartered Hanford Advisory Board that unknown material within the two walls of the double-shelled tank could be carbonate buildup, cross contamination, or rain water leakage, despite conclusive evidence from August that showed the material was from inside the tank. Public meetings in Washington and Oregon were also kept in the dark.

The leak was finally acknowledged in an official statement on October 22, 2012, with no indication of how long the leak had been known or any estimate of how long it had been leaking. The official announcement was timed to coincide with the end of a public comment period on the state permit for Hanford.

According to *King 5*, Gerry Pollet, a Washington State Representative, asserted, “This was a very deliberate cover up and I will use the word that we were lied to. There’s no two ways about it, we were lied to.”

If the leak from the double-shelled tank had been publicly known it would have caused a public outcry demanding more stringent inspection requirements and contingency procedures for when leaks are found.

The contractor responsible for monitoring the tanks, Washington River Protection Solutions (WRPS), had first detected signs of a leak in October 2011, but managers refused to investigate numerous red flags.

When the first radiation alarm was detected in 2011, WRPS instructed a technician to do a “zero-reset,” despite evidence showing that the leak detector was accurately calibrated and working correctly. Essentially the detector would disregard the radioactivity within the double walls of the tank, considering it as background radiation.

Over the next 10 months, WRPS ignored four more red flags, against the advice of their technicians, before finally conducting a thorough investigation.

On August 13, 2012, an analysis of samples from the safety space between the walls of the underground double-shelled tank contained radioisotopes Strontium-90 and Cesium-137 in high levels and smaller traces of other radioisotopes from inside the tank, confirming that the primary wall’s integrity had failed, with dire implications for the rest of Hanford's waste storage.

The 586-square-mile Hanford reservation contains 177 tanks—69 of which have failed so far—holding millions of gallons of radioactive wastes and is considered the most contaminated site in the western hemisphere. The cleanup employs 11,000 workers and consumes $2 billion per year with the most optimistic completion date projected for 2040. Formed in 1943 as part of the Manhattan Project to build the atomic bombs used at the end of World War II—Hanford supplied the plutonium for the Fat Man bomb dropped on

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Nagasaki—it has engaged in a series of cover-ups, misinformation and lies stretching back to that founding.

The double-wall tanks have been heralded as more reliable than the older single-wall tanks, which leak frequently, to hold the dangerous waste long term while a final long-term solution is worked out to process the waste safely. The leaking tank is a major setback for the effort to clean up the heavily contaminated site, which has also been hit by furloughs because of sequestration. The 28 double-shelled tanks at Hanford were projected to hold wastes from 25 to 50 years, during which technological solutions would be developed for their safe disposal.

Within that scenario, tank 241-AY-102 was to play a central role. This tank was planned to be used as a "feeder" to a Waste Treatment Plant, which is scheduled to begin operations in 2019. Waste transferred from other tanks to the feeder, however, could aggravate a leak in the primary wall, with the possibility of waste corroding the outer wall, and once again, contaminating the ground water, right on the edge of the Columbia River. The river is estimated to provide drinking water to 1.5 million people who live in Oregon and Washington and is a major source of fish and recreation.

Tank 241-AY-102 entered service in 1971 while the realistic completion of its use is after 2040. Therefore even the most generous calculation of its lifetime, 50 years, is patently short of its required service by over two decades. The disparity between the lifetime of the double-walled tanks versus the predicted date for the complete cleanup of the highly toxic contamination is indicative of the recklessness toward, and contempt for, society that characterizes the ruling elite. The massive cleanup project, begun in 1989, was initially set to be completed before 2019.

The failure of the federal government to conduct a serious investigation of the potential leak earlier, and their decision to cover up the leak for more than two months after they confirmed it are gross violations of the public trust, but that is hardly a new phenomenon.

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