

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 5, 2016

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 urge the U.S. 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 National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) in the recently completed “Review of Hanford Tank Farm Worker Safety and Health Programs” (Review) without delay. Nothing less than a complete commitment to safety at Hanford is acceptable.

As you know, one of the most challenging portions of the cleanup mission at Hanford is the approximately 55 million gallons of liquid radioactive waste stored in 177 underground tanks. Chemicals in this waste create vapors that are released into the atmosphere ensuring the waste inside the tanks remains stable. In 2014, an independent review by the Savannah River National Laboratory (SRNL) of chemical vapor exposures in or near tank farms at Hanford found that there was a “causal link between chemical vapor releases and subsequent health effects, particularly upper respiratory irritation, experienced by tank farm workers.”¹

While DOE has been working to fully implement the safety recommendations from SRNL’s review, there have been additional chemical vapor exposures. We appreciate the additional steps DOE has taken to address chemical vapor exposures, including requesting the assistance of NIOSH in June 2016 to conduct an independent workplace safety and health evaluation. The resulting Review included all workers and organizations that work within, or near, the tank farms and focused on four programmatic areas – exposure assessment, exposure control, safety and health program management, and medical. NIOSH proposed recommendations within all four review areas. With the Review in hand it is now critical that DOE take swift and definitive actions to implement the recommendations.


In addressing the recommendations, we request that DOE develop an implementation plan which includes a clear schedule and the funding necessary to carry them out successfully. DOE should also work to institutionalize the improvements in workforce safety that result from the NIOSH Review to ensure that program changes continue from contractor to contractor.

¹ Savannah River National Laboratory, “Hanford Tank Vapor Assessment Report,” pg. 13, 15, 17 (October 30, 2014).

We appreciate your commitment on this matter and the actions you have already taken, and we urge you to take the steps necessary to improve working conditions for workers in the tank farms. We owe the men and women who work in the tank farms the highest safety standards to protect them from these hazards.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue.


Sincerely,



Patty Murray
United States Senator



Maria Cantwell
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator