



Savannah River Site Watch

Savannah River Site Watch

For Immediate Release

November 12, 2015

H-Canyon/HB-Line at DOE's Savannah River Site Dramatically Fails to Meet Unrealistic Production Goals for Plutonium Oxide "Feed Stock" for Plutonium Fuel (MOX) Program

***"H-Canyon Folly, Plutonium Failure"* Report by SRS Watch Documents Program's Failures, Concludes that Plutonium Oxide Project Should be Terminated**

Columbia, SC – The U.S. Department of Energy's Savannah River Site (SRS) has fallen far short of goals to produce purified plutonium oxide for the mismanaged plutonium fuel (MOX) program, and should be canceled according to a new report released today by the public interest group Savannah River Site Watch.

The SRS Watch report entitled "[*H-Canyon Folly, Plutonium Failure*](#)" documents both the failure to meet plutonium oxide production goals and risks associated with plutonium processing in the aging H-Canyon reprocessing plant and associated HB-Line. The report concludes that as the mismanaged MOX project has been placed on a shut-down track by Congress and is likely to be terminated, the mission to produce plutonium oxide for MOX fuel is unnecessary and should be terminated.

The just-released report documents that more than 15 months after the problem-plagued plutonium oxide-production mission began that SRS has produced only 9.6 kilograms of oxide, resulting in a significant failure in the project that will be difficult to overcome if it continues. Initially, in 2013, DOE set a goal of producing 3.7 metric tons (3700 kilograms) of plutonium oxide by FY 2018 and given program challenges that production target has been shifted to FY 2022; only 0.3% of the 3.7 MT goal has been reached.

"Operation of the aging H-Canyon facilities to produce a plutonium product that is not needed poses unacceptable risks to workers and the public and the project should be terminated," according to Tom Clements, director of SRS Watch and author of the report. "If DOE resumes plutonium oxide production and tries to push its facilities and personnel to catch up with illusive production goals, fragile operations in the HB-Line will be put to an unnecessary and potentially dangerous test," added Clements.

Due to chronic technical and personnel problems with operation of the H-Canyon reprocessing plant and associated HB-Line, both operated by SRS contractor Savannah River Nuclear Solutions, SRS has produced only 9.6 kilograms of plutonium oxide. This is less than 10% of the revised cumulative goal of 100 kilograms of oxide for Fiscal Year 2015 and less than 3% of the 350-kilogram revised goal through FY 2016. SRS produced only 1.4 kilograms of oxide in Fiscal Year 2014 and none so far in Fiscal Year 2016 (which began on October 1) and production will be off line at least through the end of November.

SRS formally decided in 2012 to utilize H-Canyon facilities to produce pure plutonium oxide, a form that can be used to make mixed oxide plutonium fuel (MOX), for the National Nuclear Security

Administration's MOX project. Without preparation of environmental-impact documents on the project, oxide production began in August 2014 in the H-Canyon reprocessing plant and the associated HB-Line, which sits atop the H-Canyon.

The report concludes that any new oxide production targets may never be reached and ramped up efforts to reach them could put facilities and personnel under more stress, thus increasing the risk of a third plutonium-related incident in FB-Line.. As the H-Canyon's 60th anniversary was marked in August 2015 by SRS, the age of the facility has resulted in increased operational risks, according to SRS Watch.

Due to technical problems and operator errors, H-Canyon and HB-Line have been shut down twice in 2015 and have only operated a little more than two months this year. After an incident involving improper plutonium handling by personnel on September 3, the second such incident in HB-Line in 2015, HB-Line remains in an "operational pause" with no restart date. The aging H-Canyon, which reached its 60th anniversary earlier this year, is under a "deliberate operations," a restrictive status that involves greater management oversight.

Notes:

SRS Watch report "[H-Canyon Folly, Plutonium Failure](#)," documents the decision-making process to start plutonium oxide production in H-Canyon facilities and includes a copy of email communication from SRS to SRS Watch that documents the limited production of plutonium oxide that has been achieved. The report also includes a series of communication from September, October and November concerning the September 3 plutonium incident in the HB-Line and the subsequent "Operational Pause" ordered by Savannah River Nuclear Solutions on September 11 for all its "non-essential work."

Images of H-Canyon/HB-Line on SRS Watch website at:

<http://www.srswatch.org/uploads/2/7/5/8/27584045/6893258.jpg>

<http://www.srswatch.org/uploads/2/7/5/8/27584045/9307925.jpg>

Photos of H-Canyon, in middle of photos, with HB-Line on top of the facility, July 30, 2015, photos can be used with credit: "*©High Flyer, Special to SRS Watch*"

Contact:

Tom Clements

Director, Savannah River Site Watch

<http://www.srswatch.org/>

<https://www.facebook.com/SavannahRiverSiteWatch>

Columbia, South Carolina

tel. 803-834-3084

srswatch@gmail.com