



Savannah River Site Watch

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Columbia, South Carolina

Media Alert

June 9, 2014

Statement by Tom Clements of SRS Watch Concerning the Just-completed Revised Plan for High-Level Nuclear Waste Management at the Savannah River Site (SRS), the Most Urgent Program at SRS

***Liquid Waste System Plan SRR-LWP-2009-00001 Revision 19, dated May 15, 2014 –
on the SRS Watch Website:***

http://www.srswatch.org/uploads/2/7/5/8/27584045/r19_liquid_waste_plan_may_2014.pdf

Savannah River Site has quietly completed its revised plan on the most important program at the site: management of dangerous high-level nuclear waste created primarily as a by-product of production of nuclear weapons materials during the Cold War.

The ***Liquid Waste System Plan SRR-LWP-2009-00001 Revision 19*** has been obtained by Savannah River Site Watch, which, as its role is public education and service, is making the document more readily available to the public and decision makers.

The good news from the revised plan appears to be that Savannah River Remediation (SRR) has stitched things together well enough to keep high-level nuclear waste (HLW) disposition on track for now. The plan is a patchwork in order to reduce risk and keep HLW disposition moving forward but it is full of red flags that the path to the urgent closure of all the aging HLW tanks will not be smooth, which is not comforting to the public in South Carolina and Georgia.

Given that the revised plan acknowledges funding uncertainties, notes delays in operation of the Salt Waste Processing Facility (SWPF), presents significant delays in the tank closure schedule and highlights looming problems in meeting Federal Facility Agreement (FFA) legal obligations, the warning signs are many that the waste management situation could degrade further. All stakeholders must engage the process to make certain that the negatives trends noted in the document do not continue and that HLW processing can be much more aggressively pursued. It is imperative for the environment and public health that the program be kept moving in a positive direction and that problems do not continue to mount.

As it is clear that the ARP/MCU process has become the unplanned backbone of high-level waste processing, funding must be stabilized so that SWPF can be finished as now planned and operated at capacity. In parallel with finishing SWPF, a firm schedule for construction of the larger disposal vaults must be established and the Department of Energy must work diligently to secure funding commitments from Congress.

The State of South Carolina has expressed concern about the tank-closure obligations in the FFA being met and the revised plan makes it clear that the state would be justified in pushing harder for DOE to meet its commitments. The state must not readily accept the dramatic revision to tank closure schedule as presented in the plan simply because DOE claims that it does not have an adequate budget to meet legal commitments.

While it may indicate need for increased funding and result in more delays, the large increase in the number of canisters of vitrified high-level waste to be filled in the Defense Waste Processing Facility (DWPF) to be filled over the life of the program - from 7,824 to 8,582 canisters - holds promise that there are enough canisters yet to be filled to accommodate additional immobilization of surplus weapons plutonium. DOE's Plutonium Disposition Working Group must take notice that the number of canisters to be filled has gone up by almost 10% and that the timeline for filling canisters has thus been extended a number of years.

The plan overlooks the impact to the HLW system of the proposed import of high-level liquid nuclear waste from Canada and the possible import of 895,000 highly radioactive graphite fuel balls from Germany – from two closed commercial, experimental gas-cooled nuclear reactors. If SRS were to process this imported material it would negatively impact the site's ability to manage nuclear waste and these impacts must be discussed by DOE in the next revision of the plan. SRS can ill afford to receive more nuclear waste into the site and decisions must be taken to halt import of foreign and domestic highly radioactive waste.

The Savannah River Site Citizens Advisory Board (SRS CAB) and the public must be briefed on the details of the plan as soon as possible and participate in a Q&A session on this program of highest importance at SRS.

Taken as a whole, HLW processing continues moving ahead for now but the increasing risks to various aspects of the program as noted in the revised plan cause discomfort about what could happen if the budget tightens further. It will take increased engagement by DOE and others to persuade Congress to fully fund SRS high-level waste management to avoid the essential program running off the tracks.

The plutonium fuel (MOX) boondoggle has becoming a major negative distraction from the main mission of SRS: cleaning up and containing deadly high-level nuclear waste. Politicians such as Senator Lindsey Graham and Representative Joe Wilson must end their destructive obsession with continuing unsustainable funding for the failed MOX program and refocus on the high-level waste program, the program at SRS of most importance by far from a public safety and jobs perspective.

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