

Recommendation 315

Public Meetings on Background and Status of High-Level Waste Tank Closure Program

Background

As the result of many years of nuclear materials production at the Savannah River Site, about 37 million gallons of radioactive liquid waste have been placed in 49 underground storage tanks. Twenty-four of these do not meet secondary containment standards of the Federal Facility Agreement or have leaked, so closing them has been a top priority of the Department of Energy's cleanup program. The Department and the regulatory agencies with cleanup oversight responsibilities have often stated that the High Level Waste in these tanks poses the greatest environmental risk in South Carolina.

For example, in an October 1, 2012 news release on SRS.gov about the closing of tanks 18 and 19, the following is stated:

“Successful closure of SRS Tanks 18 and 19 signifies the most substantial environmental risk reduction achievement for the State of South Carolina since 1997 when DOE closed Tanks 17 and 20, the first for SRS and the Nation.”

In an August 18, 2013, letter from Catherine Templeton, Director of the SC Department of Health and Environmental Control, to Dr. Ernest Moniz, Secretary of the US Department of Energy, the following is stated:

“The high level radioactive liquid waste stored in aging tanks at the Savannah River Site (SRS) poses the single largest environmental threat in South Carolina.”

And most recently, in a September 6, 2013, letter from South Carolina Governor, Nikki R. Haley, to Dr. Ernest Moniz, Secretary of the US Department of Energy, the following is stated:

“As you know, the single largest environmental, health, and economic risk to the State of South Carolina is 37 million gallons of high-level nuclear waste sitting in antiquated tanks on the Savannah River Site (SRS) near Aiken, South Carolina.”

This view that the waste tanks pose a significant risk was also reiterated in a 2010 report (“Actions Needed to Address Persistent Concerns with Efforts to Close Underground Radioactive Waste Tanks at DOE's Savannah River Site”) by the U.S. Government Accountability Office: “Many of these tanks have a history of leakage and 8 are sitting near or below the water table, raising concerns that radioactive and hazardous waste in the tanks could leak into the groundwater and endanger worker safety, public health, and the environment.” (page 1)

As a result of these statements, the public realizes that a very serious threat exists, but wonder how they might be personally impacted, because the actual risks go unstated. For those living near the Savannah River Site, Emergency Preparedness Plans are distributed annually, but it is not clear from the Plan how they might be impacted from a release or incident involving the underground storage tanks. For downstream citizens the major concern is the risk of contamination of the Savannah River, which is the drinking water source to the City of Savannah, GA, and neighboring communities in Beaufort and Jasper Counties in South Carolina. In fact, the annual drinking water quality report provided by drinking water suppliers indicates that some of the tritium in the drinking water comes from the Savannah River Site. While tritium levels are well below the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Safe Drinking Water

standard, it is clear that the operations on the Savannah River Site can impact the water quality of the Savannah River. However, it is not clear to the public whether the highly radioactive waste in the underground storage tanks put drinking water supplies at risk.

Comments

It is a great concern that budget appropriations are not adequate to complete the closure of the 20 most vulnerable tanks in a timely manner. It is important that the citizens, who have a potential to be impacted, are made aware of the risk of the delays and kept abreast of the progress of the tank closure program. Currently, most of the citizens in Savannah, GA, and in Beaufort and Jasper Counties are not aware of the operations at the Savannah River Site and the associated risks, as members of the Citizens Advisory Board can attest.

It is often said that knowledge is power. The citizens both near and downstream from the Savannah River Site need to be empowered to have a say in the future of the tank closure program. The only way this will happen is by providing them accurate, honest, frank, up-to-date information about the human health and environmental dangers, technological challenges, budget details, and successes of the tank closure program.

Recommendation:

The Savannah River Site Citizens Advisory Board recommends that the Department of Energy:

- 1) Hold public meetings to provide accurate, honest, frank, up-to-date information about the human health and environmental dangers, technological challenges, budget details, timetable, and successes of the tank closure program.
 - a. How budget constraints will impact the timetable of the tank closure program in FY 2014 and beyond must be included.
- 2) Hold the first such public meetings before the end of 2013, and annually thereafter, in the cities of Aiken, and Bluffton, SC, Augusta and Savannah, GA, and other communities deemed to be appropriate by the Department with input from the Citizens Advisory Board.
 - a. The meetings should be held in a public place, such as a public high school so that citizens have easy access.
 - b. The meetings should be held in the evening.
 - c. The meetings should be widely advertised in local newspapers and radio stations.
- 3) Invite the local drinking water suppliers to participate in the public meetings.
- 4) Invite the Environmental Protection Agency (including Environmental Justice staff), SC Department of Health and Environmental Control, and the GA Department of Natural Resources to participate in the public meetings.
- 5) Invite members of the Citizens Advisory Board to attend the meetings.
- 6) Develop a questionnaire to be distributed to those attending the public meetings so that the effectiveness can be assessed and additional concerns can be identified.
- 7) Consider expanding the public information meetings in the future to include other environmental concerns expressed by the public.
- 8) Invite members of the press to attend and report.