

# State suspends half of \$500K fine for Hanford spill

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By SHANNON DININNY  
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YAKIMA, Wash. (AP) — The state and federal government agreed Thursday to settle a \$500,000 fine imposed after a radioactive and hazardous waste spill at the nation's most contaminated nuclear site.

The spill occurred July 27, when workers at south-central Washington's Hanford nuclear reservation were pumping the toxic waste from an underground tank. When a pump blocked, they tried to unblock it by running it in reverse, but 85 gallons of waste spilled onto the ground.

The state Department of Ecology fined the U.S. Department of Energy \$500,000 in December, but the two agencies announced Thursday they had reached a settlement.

Under the agreement, half of that fine will be suspended in exchange for completing a list of corrective actions. In addition, the Energy Department and its contractor, CH2M Hill Hanford Group, must complete one year and 360 hours of active tank waste retrieval operations without any similar incidents occurring.

CH2M Hill will still be required to pay a \$50,000 penalty. The company will give emergency equipment valued at \$100,000 to a local hazardous materials response team that operates in Benton, Franklin, Yakima and Walla Walla counties under a mutual aid pact.

CH2M Hill also must spend at least \$200,000 to replace more than a dozen large air filters mounted on vent pipes coming out of the top of underground tanks.

Because the latter improvements are considered capital expenditures, only half of that money counts toward the settlement, said Ron Skinnarland, Ecology's waste management section manager.

"These are things that would probably be done anyway, but they're doing them sooner," Skinnarland said. "Overall, the good news is, it's a settlement, so instead of the penalty money coming into state coffers, the money will go into fixing some environmental problems and, we think, improving conditions going forward."

The federal government created Hanford in the 1940s as part of the top-secret Manhattan Project to build the atomic bomb. Today, it is the nation's most contaminated nuclear site with cleanup expected to continue for decades.

Much of the cleanup involves treating 53 million gallons of highly radioactive waste that has been stewing in 177 aging underground tanks.

Sixty-three workers were within 200 meters, or 656 feet, of the June spill and were identified for ongoing medical monitoring. Of them, 13 workers complained of symptoms that could be

attributed to the spill, including upper respiratory problems, upset stomachs, headaches, dizziness, eye irritation and blurred vision.

"This was a serious event that could have been prevented," Shirley J. Olinger, manager of the Energy Department's Office of River Protection, said in a statement. "We have worked closely with CH2M Hill to close and implement all corrective measures that were identified over the last several months and have strengthened our operations, emergency management, engineering and safety to prevent this type of event from reoccurring."

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