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■ Hanford Employee Being Tested for COVID-19; Cases Confirmed at Nuclear Fuel Services

An employee at the Hanford Site in Washington state is being tested for COVID-19, the Department of Energy said in an overnight post.

Cleaning procedures at the facility where the individual works, Building 6269, have been completed in keeping with standards from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Hanford management said in the [notice](#). The announcement did not say if the person is a federal employee or contractor, or whether the worker displayed common coronavirus symptoms, such as a fever or bad cough.

In keeping with guidance from the local Benton Franklin Health District, staff assigned to the office building should monitor themselves for signs of illness, DOE said. However, they are not directed to take any special action at this time.

Hanford, like most other DOE nuclear cleanup sites, has drawn down to minimal operations during the federal public health emergency. Probably no more than 20% of its usual workforce remains on-site.

To date, Hanford has not reported any positive COVID-19 results among its workforce of about 11,000 federal and contractor employees.

Meanwhile, BWX Technologies subsidiary Nuclear Fuel Services on Tuesday reported multiple cases of COVID-19 among its workforce.

The Erwin, Tenn., defense-uranium contractor did not say how many employees were infected, or how many potentially exposed employees were in quarantine following contact with the sick workers.

“Our coronavirus response protocols call for enhanced cleaning across the site, social distancing, hand washing, hand sanitizing and use of face masks,” Nuclear Fuel Services said in a prepared statement. “Employees who experience COVID-19-like symptoms, have potentially been exposed, or are ill have been instructed to stay home.”

It was not clear whether the COVID-19 emergency response might delay any Nuclear Fuel Services contract milestones. Among other things, the company is producing low-enriched uranium to produce tritium in civilian nuclear reactors for National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) nuclear weapons programs.

Nuclear Fuel Services also could wind up purifying defense uranium for the weapons program around 2023. The NNSA is negotiating with the company to act as a backstop for the Y-12 National Security Complex in Oak Ridge, Tenn., in a few years.

As of late last week, there were more than 50 confirmed cases across the NNSA's nuclear weapons sites. There are currently at least nine confirmed cases at nuclear-cleanup programs overseen by the DOE Office of Environmental Management.

■ Hanford Contract Protests Should be Decided Soon

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) is expected by May 1 to rule on formal protests of two multibillion-dollar Energy Department contracts for the Hanford Site in Washington state, a source said Tuesday.

To date, the COVID-19 pandemic has not forced schedule slippage in adjudication of protests to federal contract

awards, and the GAO anticipates deciding on the Hanford cases within its standard 100-day timeline, the source said via email.

In December, DOE's Office of Environmental Management issued a potential 10-year, \$4-billion site services contract to a Leidos-led venture. A few days later, it awarded a Hanford Central Plateau cleanup contract for up to 10 years and \$10 billion to a team led by AECOM's Management Services business, which subsequently split off into the independent company Amentum.

In January, a team led by Huntington Ingalls Industries contested the landlord services contract, while a venture led by Bechtel National filed its [protest](#) over the Central Plateau remediation award.

The justifications for the protests have not been made public.

Although supplements to the original protests were filed to the original actions, the GAO still intends to act upon the landlord site services protest by April 22, and the Central Plateau case by April 30. The decisions might not be publicly available by those dates, as often certain confidential data must be withheld before a public decision can be made available the source said. But a public version is usually available on the GAO website within two weeks.

■ **Congress to Remain in Recess Through Early May**

Both chambers of Congress will remain on recess later than scheduled, returning no earlier than May 4, lawmakers said on Tuesday.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) announced the upper chamber would add two weeks to its current recess in a Tuesday note to fellow senators, then in a press release. His announcement follows a similar message from House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) on Monday.

The goal is to continue social distancing and combat the spread of the respiratory disease COVID-19, the lawmakers said. Congress was originally scheduled to return from recess April 20.

"As the country continues working together to flatten the curve, following the advice of health experts, the full Senate is not expected to travel back to Washington D.C. sooner than Monday, May 4th," McConnell said in the release. Senators would be given 24 hours' notice before being required to return for a regular session.

Any pending nominations will now be extended until at least May 4 as a result.

The leaders of the House and Senate Armed Services committees have recently told reporters they plan to mark up the fiscal 2021 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) by the end of May. The annual defense policy bill covers the National Nuclear Security Administration, and most of the work done by the Department of Energy's Environmental Management office. However, lawmakers acknowledge that schedules remain fluid and are dependent upon health guidelines issued by federal, state, and local government officials.

This story first appeared in Weapons Complex Morning Briefing affiliate publication Defense Daily.

■ **Sandia Maintenance Shop, Warehouse, Closed for Cleaning After COVID-19 Case**

The Sandia National Laboratories in New Mexico said Monday it had evacuated its Building 954 and might do some deep cleaning there, after confirmed a case of COVID-19 among the workforce.

The lab was at deadline determining which employees at Building 954 had been in contact with the infected recently, [according to Sandia's website](#). The building is a central maintenance shop and supply warehouse that Sandia is keeping open to support essential personnel working on site, in spite of COVID-19. The building also includes a bicycle lab — closed because of the pandemic — run by a subcontractor that maintains a fleet of bicycles, and sells bikes to employees.

This is Sandia's 10th reported confirmed case of COVID-19. The total includes people at both the Albuquerque and Livermore, Calif., locations.

Sandia on April 7 rolled out limited COVID-19 testing for its employees, contractors, and subcontractors.

The lab has previously evacuated, deep-cleaned, and reopened buildings within a day or two of confirming a COVID-19 case among the workforce in a specific location. Last week, Sandia completed that entire process for Building 860, the Environmental Test Lab, in about 24 hours.

Sandia is in the middle of New Mexico's worst outbreak. Surrounding Bernalillo County had 455 confirmed cases, including 16 confirmed deaths, at deadline for *Weapons Complex Morning Briefing*, according to a tracker maintained by the Johns Hopkins University. The county had more than one-third of New Mexico's

1,245 confirmed cases, which includes 26 deaths.

Sandia and the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory in California are surrounded by far worse outbreaks than the Los Alamos National Laboratory, also in northern New Mexico.

Editor's note, April 15, 2020, 2:58 p.m. Eastern time. The story was corrected to explain why Building 954 was open during Sandia's mission-essential posture, and to show that the COVID-19 case there was the lab's 10th, and that the lab started limited COVID-19 testing for employees on April 7.

■ **Plutonium Arguments on for Appeals Court, Despite COVID-19, Settlement Talks**

The COVID-19 pandemic has not stopped the Department of Energy's plans to dispose of surplus plutonium, nor arguments in a long-running \$200 million lawsuit on the matter with the state of South Carolina.

The Department of Energy and South Carolina are actually close to settling the matter. However, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit on Monday said oral arguments in the appeal scheduled for May 5 will proceed — coronavirus be damned — over the telephone.

In its 2017 lawsuit, the state is seeking \$200 million in payments DOE racked up in 2016 and 2017 for failing to remove excess plutonium stored at the Savannah River Site in Aiken, S.C.. A 2002 federal law says DOE must make "economic assistance payments" totaling up to \$100 million annually for every year after Jan. 1, 2016, that the agency doesn't start moving plutonium out of South Carolina.

The appeal in the Federal Circuit is, for now, South Carolina's only legal leverage regarding the unpaid fines. The Court of Federal Claims, where the state initially sued, in 2019 accepted the Energy Department's argument that it did not have to make any payments unless Congress specifically appropriated money for that purpose. The state disagreed in an appeal filed last year, saying there is no legal reason DOE's semiautonomous National Nuclear Security Administration cannot pay the fines from its Material Disposition account, within Defense Nuclear Nonproliferation.

That's the argument South Carolina will make, if it has to, in the phone call scheduled for May 5.

The Energy Department originally planned to dispose of the surplus plutonium at Savannah River using the Mixed Oxide Fuel Fabrication Facility, which the agency formally axed in 2018. That facility is slated to become a factory to annually produce 50 plutonium pits by 2030. The plutonium it would have turned into commercial reactor fuel will be blended down, immobilized in a concrete-like mixture, and buried at DOE's Waste Isolation Pilot Plant in New Mexico.

There is about 10 metric tons of surplus plutonium already at Savannah River Site awaiting disposal. The Energy Department has said it will dispose of 34 metric tons of surplus plutonium, in line with the terms of the now-moribund Plutonium Management and Disposition Agreement between the United States and Russia.

■ **Pandemic's Impact on SONGS Decommissioning Unclear**

Southern California Edison is unsure how the COVID-19 pandemic will impact the cost and schedule for decommissioning of the San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station (SONGS).

The utility has paused tackling the actual tearing down of buildings and removing heavy equipment from the retired nuclear power plant in San Diego County. However, Edison is continuing with preliminary operations, including the ongoing transfer of spent fuel from two reactors into dry storage.

As of Thursday, Edison had moved 58 of 73 canisters of used fuel rods to underground storage along the Pacific Ocean. That work, carried out by contractor Holtec International, is expected to be finished this summer. Other on-site preparations for decommissioning are underway, with the main decommissioning due to be completed by 2028.

On March 25, Edison announced it would pause some decommissioning work to study what could be continued under its protocols for dealing with a pandemic. It continued asbestos removal in the containment buildings for reactor Units 2 and 3, completed upgrading a rail spur, and has been studying the site's contamination. However, a significant amount of other preparation work on the reactor containment domes is still being evaluated regarding effects of the coronavirus' ripple effects.

The evaluation is part of Edison's response to Gov. Gavin Newsom's (D) March 19 executive order directing California residents to stay home unless they are needed to support the functioning of critical infrastructure. The order is intended to slow the spread of COVID-19.

Southern California Edison permanently retired SONGS Units 2 and 3 in 2013, more than two decades after

Unit 1 was shuttered in 1992. Major decommissioning operations began in February on the two reactors, a \$4.4 billion job managed by contractor SONGS Decommissioning Solutions.

■ **Subcontractor Retained to Shore Up 3 Underground Hanford Facilities**

The primary cleanup vendor for the Energy Department's Hanford Site in Washington state has lined up a subcontractor to stabilize three underground structures with grout, according to a Tuesday press release.

Jacobs subsidiary CH2M Hill Plateau Remediation is issuing a \$3.9 million subcontract to engineering firm White Shield, of Pasco, Wash., to design and apply engineered grout at three sites near the former Plutonium Finishing Plant.

The structures – the 216-Z-2 Crib, 216-Z-9 Crib, and 241-Z-361 Settling Tank – all received liquid waste during Hanford's plutonium production days. As a result, they contain residual radioactive and chemical contamination.

All three of these aging facilities are in danger of collapse. The Energy Department, which is [seeking](#) public comment on the plan to stabilize the sites, wants to avoid a repeat of the May 2017 partial collapse of Tunnel 1 at Hanford's Plutonium Uranium Extraction (PUREX) Plant. The public comment period started March 23 and runs through May 22. A public hearing on the matter has been [postponed](#) from March 26 due to concern over COVID-19.

The work is considered time-sensitive, but not an emergency. Therefore, initial planning and design of the necessary grout mix and conveyance system will be done remotely, CH2M said in the press release. Hanford has reduced its on-site staffing dramatically as a result of the pandemic.

Most physical work at Hanford is currently suspended due to COVID-19. At some point after normal operations resume, trucks will deliver the grout that will be piped into the structures. Workers will also lower lights and cameras underground in order to monitor grout flow.

White Shield is a Native American-owned company named after Chief White Shield of the Arikara Tribe, according to its website.

■ **EPA Reviewing Two West Lake Landfill Cleanup Docs**

The Environmental Protection Agency is reviewing documents for cleanup of two sections of the West Lake Landfill in Missouri.

Both documents were filed in March by the potentially responsible parties for remediation of Operable Unit 1 (OU-1) and Operable Unit 2 (OU-2) of the Superfund property near St. Louis, according to an April update from the EPA.

The draft design investigation work plan for OU-1 will provide details of investigations needed to complete design for the cleanup approach set in a 2018 update to the 2008 record of decision on remediating West Lake. Approval of a revised work plan for remedial design of OU-2 would enable property owner Bridgeton Landfill to begin the actual design under a 2008 record of decision.

Operable Unit 1 is the radioactively contaminated portion of the 200-acre West Lake Landfill, resulting from the use as trash cover of 39,000 tons of surface soil mixed with 8,700 tons of leached barium sulfite residues. The potentially responsible parties are Bridgeton Landfill, Cotter Corp., and the Department of Energy.

The selected cleanup remedy involves extracting radiologically impacted material down as far as 20 feet in the contaminated zones. Soil contaminated at levels above 52.9 picocuries per gram would largely be removed to a depth of 12 feet. In certain sections material with concentrations above 52.9 picocuries per gram will not be removed at depths of 8 to 12 feet. Following completion of excavation, an engineered cover would be placed atop the impacted area. This work is forecast to cost \$205 million over three years, paid by the potentially responsible parties.

In this month's update, the EPA said its Region 7 office would review and submit comments on the draft design investigation work plan. It would be made public after the agency submits comments to the potentially responsible parties.

■ **Former Employee Sues Holtec for Discrimination, Unfair Leave Policy**

A former employee of energy technology firm Holtec International said in a federal lawsuit Monday that she was forced to resign in January in the face of harassment and illegal practices on medical and family leave.

Gereka Bracey is seeking reimbursement for lost earnings, punitive damages, damages for emotional distress, and legal costs, according to the complaint filed in U.S. District Court for New Jersey.

Bracey said she was hired as a welder at Holtec’s Camden, N.J., production hub in March 2018. She was among no more than three women on a shop floor of about 100 employees, and was subjected to unfair treatment by management and harassment by one co-worker, the complaint says.

Bracey said she was generally the last shop employee to be assigned specific work, meaning she ended up doing sweeping, wiping, or other activities that did not match her skills.

Starting in October 2019, she was also subjected to harassment by a male co-worker, including whistling “in a cat-calling manner” and inappropriate comments, the lawsuit says. Bracey complained to her supervisor and Holtec human resources, but was required to work with the employee in December of that year after being told that would not happen, it adds.

Starting in March 2019, Bracey took leave under the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act to deal with medical issues and mental-health concerns. She also required leave under the New Jersey Family Leave Act after receiving guardianship of her 24-year-old son, who is autistic and has significant developmental delays.

In January of this year, Holtec reportedly said Bracey had used up all her available leave under the Family and Medical Leave Act and denied her request to use time under the New Jersey Family Leave Act to care for her son.

Holtec did not respond by deadline Wednesday to a query regarding the lawsuit.

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