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February 20, 2020

The Honorable Dan Brouillette  
Secretary of Energy  
U.S. Department of Energy  
1000 Independence Ave SW  
Washington, D.C. 20585

Dear Mr. Secretary:

The GAO report “Hanford Cleanup: DOE Should Take Actions to Improve Inspections and Oversight of Contaminated Excess Facilities (GAO-20-161),” which my colleagues and I requested after the collapse of a legacy radioactive waste storage tunnel at the Hanford site, found significant problems with the way such facilities at the Hanford site are evaluated, monitored, and prioritized. Although DOE has agreed to implement all of GAO’s recommendations, I do not believe this is sufficient to ensure protection of workers at the site and the citizens in the region. I am writing today to ask that you outline the specific steps that the Department will take to ensure that there will not be any future unexpected failures of containment at legacy radioactive waste facilities at Hanford.

As recounted by GAO, “(i)n May 2017, Hanford workers discovered a partial collapse of the timber roof structure in one of the PUREX Plant’s two storage tunnels. While the PUREX event did not result in any injuries to workers or measurable release of radioactive or toxic materials into the surrounding environment, it raised questions about the adequacy of surveillance and maintenance (S&M) activities for contaminated excess facilities, such as PUREX, that are not scheduled for final cleanup in the near future. In addition, this event caused concerns about how DOE prioritizes and schedules cleanup of contaminated excess facilities at Hanford.”

The unexpected partial collapse of PUREX Tunnel 1 seems largely due to a failure of DOE and its contractors to independently verify the tunnel’s physical condition—a state of affairs replicated over many years across the site’s facilities. This failure was the result of inadequate assessments of the condition and risk the facilities pose, as well as the failure of the Department to ensure that legacy facilities were the subject of routine surveillance programs to monitor their actual condition.

Two notable areas where GAO found oversight lacking were the high-hazard 216-Z-9 crib and the Plutonium Finishing Plant 241-Z-361 Settling Tank which are believed to contain significant quantities of plutonium. Both assessments “appear to have relied on outdated information and reached determinations seemingly inconsistent with the contractor’s more recent analyses and conclusions.”

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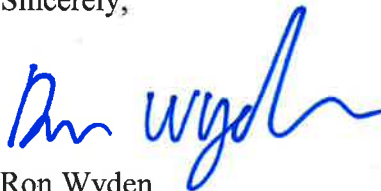
Please describe what specific corrective actions the Richland Field Office (RL) is going to take to ensure that legacy waste sites at Hanford are subject to independent risk assessments.

As noted in GAO's report, many facilities in question, including the PUREX tunnels, were not included in routine surveillance inspections within the past five years or longer. Some facilities, such as areas of the REDOX reprocessing canyon have not been entered if 50 years. Without knowing the current condition of such facilities, DOE cannot ensure their safety. To cite GAO, "DOE would have greater assurance that RL and the contractor's process for identifying cleanup priorities reflects the current status of the potential human health and environmental risks present at such facilities." Although many of these facilities are highly radioactive and direct entry by workers would be problematic, advances in remote surveillance technology suggest that additional monitoring could be achieved. Please describe what steps the Department will take at Hanford to ensure that legacy waste sites are subject to an effective surveillance and monitoring program.

Finally, the GAO report raised a number of questions concerning the failure of DOE to effectively oversee the way in which legacy waste sites are safeguarded and their risks are evaluated, beginning with the decision by RL to waive the requirement that the contractor perform a root cause analysis for the collapse of the PUREX tunnel. GAO also found that the Office of Environmental Management (EM) had not conducted any assessments of the Hanford contractor's surveillance and maintenance activities since 2013. GAO also reported that EM doesn't provide specific written guidance on how sites like Hanford should set remediation priorities. Furthermore, according to GAO, neither of the two outside regulators at the site – the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency nor the State of Washington Department of Ecology – are directly involved in the development of Project Evaluation Matrix that the site uses to establish priorities for addressing these legacy facilities. Please describe what changes the DOE will make in the way it oversees work at the Hanford site and the way in which the risks posed by legacy waste sites at Hanford to workers and the environment are evaluated and prioritized.

I look forward to receiving written clarification on these three issues by March 20, 2020.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden  
United States Senator