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Workers' radiation exposure halts U.S. nuke plant demolition

By [Karen Graham](#)

At least 42 workers at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Washington state are being exposed to radiation as they tear down buildings that helped create the nation's nuclear arsenal.

Located in central Washington state, the [Hanford Nuclear Reservation](#) is the largest nuclear waste dump in the Western Hemisphere. It has also America's most contaminated nuclear waste site in North America.

For the past year, dozens of workers demolishing the Plutonium Finishing Plant located on the reservation have either [inhaled or ingested radioactive particles](#) - even carrying the particles into their private vehicles, according to the Department of Energy.

The incidents have finally prompted the federal government and state regulators to halt any further demolition of the plutonium processing plant until a safe plan can be developed.



Workers at the Hanford Nuclear Plant
Department of Energy

To think that with all the incidents that have occurred since January 2017 - including leaking storage

tanks and in particular, the spreading radiation in the deteriorating [Reduction-Oxidation Complex](#), more commonly called REDOX, which the DOE is very much aware of - it is difficult to wrap one's mind around not having a plan for the cleanup.

How contaminated is the Hanford site ?

The [Chicago Tribune](#) is reporting the Associated Press is saying the contamination has also shaken confidence in the massive cleanup at the Hanford site, something that has been going on since 1988. It was expected that the work of cleaning up and decontaminating the site would take about 30 years to complete.

So far, the federal government has been spending about \$2 billion annually, using around 11,000 people working to round up, clean up, and remove waste, contaminated buildings, and contaminated soil. By 2008, the job was less than half finished. Even if everything were to go well in the cleanup efforts, it will take decades before the Hanford site could be deemed safe, if ever.

One unanswerable question stymies everyone involved in the cleanup and has resulted in a great deal of heated debate, What to do with the plutonium ? Plutonium has a half-life of 24,100 years, and a decay of ten half-lives is required before a sample is considered to cease its radioactivity.



An aerial view of the Hanford Vit Plant covers 65 acres with four nuclear facilities in southeastern Washington state.
U.S. Department of Energy

Problems with the Bechtel vitrification plant

Thinking to make the plutonium more stable for storage, the Energy Department hired a San Francisco, California-based engineering, and construction company to build a vitrification plant. Vitrification is a process by which hazardous wastes are combined with glass to make them stable. Bechtel, the company contracted to build the plant, began construction in 2001. The project was to be finished in 2011, and the vitrification completed by 2028.

This project ran into cost overruns and technical problems from the start. By 2013, the cost of the project had risen to over \$13.4 billion, with a scheduled start of operations in 2022. But according to the [Seattle Times](#), the feds are seriously doubting the Bechtel plant will open by 2022.

The plant now has a price tag of \$17 billion and has been plagued with safety and design issues. DOE officials have been on Bechtel's case to improve their performance, but have not notified the state of Washington that legal deadlines for the project may be at risk.