

US Senator Maria Cantwell
Senate Floor Speech on the Hanford Cleanup

September 11, 2025

[VIDEO]

Sen. Cantwell: Mr. President, I come to the floor today to remind everyone in the United States of America that we have a cleanup obligation at the Hanford Site in the State of Washington, and to remind the Secretary of Energy and the Trump Administration of a commitment to that part of the United States, to our nation, and to the cleanup of the most contaminated nuclear site in our nation.

We have an agreement between the Washington State Department of Ecology, the US Environmental Protection Agency, and the US Department of Energy, and that is to clean up this site. Right now, there are 56 million gallons of radioactive and chemical waste being stored underground in World War Two Era tanks. These 177 waste storage tanks are over [80] years old, so definitely beyond their life design.

Some of these tanks are leaking over 1000 gallons of waste in a year into the ground. So, this waste is making its way to the Columbia River, which supplies drinking water to nearly [30,000] residents in the Tri-Cities.

The Federal Government, as I mentioned, is legally and morally obligated to clean up the dangerous mess it left on the sprawling Hanford Site. We know this part of our US history and the effort that men and women [made] during World War Two in an unbelievable time frame, but it also left us with a huge obligation to clean up the nuclear waste.

The [Tri-Party] agreement-guides the Hanford Cleanup schedule and the goals that need to be met to complete this mission. Our current energy secretary, if he's thinking about ignoring these commitments to science or the Tri-Party Agreement, he needs to rethink that. This couldn't come at a worse time.

In just six weeks, for the first time, the removal and treatment of radioactive waste that's been stored in these tanks and in the ground for 80 years, will begin to be processed. This process, called vitrification, a process that other countries, like France and Japan and Germany have all successfully achieved -- is basically taking the radioactive sludge and turning it into a stable, storable glass. That is what the skilled workers at the Hanford Site have been working on for years. *Years, years.* Really. Literally, 23 years and about \$24 billion in taxpayer money to build a vitrification plant that supports 3,000 jobs in the Tri-Cities to get this post-World War Two job done.

When Secretary Wright testified in the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, he said, "Senator," speaking to me, "I can't overstate how critical I think it is to finish the job, finish the

cleanup at Hanford. Hanford gave a lot to this country, and we left a mess that needs to be cleaned up.” He went on to say, “I am firmly committed to continuing our obligations and our moral obligations to clean up the mess that was left behind in your state.”

So, I had a chance to ask the Secretary about this, and that is why news this week that somehow, maybe in October, we are not going to start the vitrification plan. We are not, after 23 years and \$24 billion going to actually start the process of taking the... radioactive waste and turning it into this glassification process, so we can once and for all dispose of it.

I know that the people in the Tri-Cities are very anxious about this situation because the vitrification plant, as I said, was supposed to start on October 15th.

You don't have to go far back-- well, actually, maybe you do have to go far back several energy secretaries-- to look at what happens when it comes to Hanford Cleanup. Every time a new administration comes in, somebody looks at the amount of money that it takes to clean up nuclear waste that's been stored in tanks and says, ‘This costs too much. We ought to be able to do it cheaper.’

So, I would say to our current colleagues over at the Department of Energy, you need to look at history and think twice. Secretary Abraham, Energy Secretary, formerly United States Senator from Michigan, said that he was going to fundamentally transform cleanup with an accelerated cleanup plan in 2002. This represented the most dramatic shift in a cleanup strategy since the original Tri-Party Agreement between the United States Government and those agencies that I mentioned. He claimed that he would save \$50 billion on cleanup. Guess what? It didn't work. Just delayed the cleanup and cost taxpayers more money.

Secretary Bodman, he inherited. Secretary Abraham’s unrealistic promise, and he failed to address the fundamental technical problems emerging at the waste treatment plant. Problems with hydrogen gas build up, pulse jet mixing, nuclear critical risk, and identified during his tenure, but not adequately addressed-- creating a legacy of, really, technical debt that would cost billions of dollars to resolve.

I can say to my colleagues, I got to a point that I said, I am for an energy secretary for life, or until they clean up Hanford, because that's how technical the ... job [is], and leaving it every few years to a new energy secretary and administrators, to me, was part of the challenge.

Also during the Bush Administration, when Secretary Boman was there, they tried to shortcut the cleanup process by saying we could just grout the waste. Okay? So, obviously, you can't just pour concrete on high level nuclear waste, on a toxic brew, and then just leave it in the ground. So many, many challenges there.

Despite Secretary Chu's noble Nobel Prize-winning credentials and genuine commitment to scientific rigor, he failed to overcome the systematic problems at Hanford...

Secretary Moniz, a physicist secretary, attempted to work around the waste treatment plant's technical problems. His framework for tank waste cleanup, including sending some waste to New Mexico and a partial treatment within the tanks-- approaches that essentially abandoned the original cleanup strategy without demonstrating the alternatives would be faster and cheaper.

I'm sure there were people over at OMB that probably egged on these ideas, thinking that somehow they were going to save money. They didn't. They didn't even work.

Secretary Perry achieved no significant breakthrough in addressing Hanford's cost or schedule problems. The single shell tanks continued to deteriorate, with Tank B-109 actively leaking during his tenure. That's radioactive waste leaking.

The waste treatment plant remained plagued by technical problems and schedule delays with low activity waste facilities not operational, despite being nearly complete.

Energy Secretary Brouillette probably did the best job I've seen in my tenure. He-- this was in the last Trump Administration-- he and his [Deputy] Secretary Dabbar, really focused on project management and got the low activity waste facility finally dialed in and on track.

So, literally, created the facility to treat the waste. This facility that is set to be open-- apparently now, someone is calling into question, 'maybe, let's not open it.'

After 23 years and \$24 billion and all these problems and all these mishaps of every Energy Secretary listening to probably a lower staffer, saying, 'There's a way to do it differently,' somehow somebody's following in the same apparent wrong-headed idea that somehow you don't have to turn on this plant and we shouldn't move forward.

I know that we must continue our obligations at the facility. I know that we can't walk away from this commitment. I know that the vitrification process has been proven scientifically, and unless there is a problem at this plant, we need to move forward with the production of waste to glass that people have been counting on for years.

We cannot put another generation of Washingtonians or Tri-Citians or US citizens leaving this kind of waste without a solution. We can't change course. We need to stay the course and get this project done.

I hope we will be having an opening and ... that we can finally say, 'We have treated this waste and are ready to remove the rest of the waste in the tanks.'

I thank the President and I yield the floor.