

To: DNFSB, Mr. Thibadeau.

Date: 7/19/2011

Re: Recommendation 2011-1, "Safety Culture at the Waste Treatment and Immobilization Plant"

I would like to comment on recommendation 2011-1. I believe it would be helpful to your understanding of my comments if I provided some background on myself and my involvement on the Hanford site.

During the middle 80's and early 90's I was a systems engineer at Sandia National Laboratories working in organizations responsible for the stockpile of nuclear weapons. In this capacity I visited and was involved with working with many related DOE facilities, e.g. Kansas City, LANL, LLNL, Pantex, Y12 etc.

In 1991 I was invited to become an engineering teacher at Walla Walla University which I accepted. Since 1991, except for three summers, I have spent each summer consulting for the Hanford Site for a variety of contractors, always working on the same type of projects – transportation safety. Currently I am working directly with the CHPRC on transportation safety issues. Thus my experience at Hanford has been related to safety and I have been involved in the design, analysis, modeling, and documentation of safety related activities for the past 20 years.

Given that I have had a full-time "job" as an engineering associate professor during these last 20 years while consulting for Hanford, I have never allowed any "pressure" to effect my work performance with respect to what I think is the proper level of safety to apply to any given project. Let me be even clearer on that note – I have never been pressured to compromise on safety.

Given my full-time teaching job, I have not had to worry about worker retaliation because if I was pressured out of my work – for being too safe, I already had something to do that I loved. However, I have never felt such pressure. Never! In the 20 years of working for half a dozen different contractors (all related to transportation safety), I have never been threatened, condemned, or felt the least bit intimidated for thinking and acting safely. This included projects where I have rejected other peoples work as not satisfactory and suggesting a complete redo of the work to ensure that proper safety practices were considered and implemented correctly. I can also think of several projects I have worked on over the years where my efforts have delayed the projects ability to meet the milestones to be eligible for performance incentives that DOE provides. I have simple always done what I think should be done, even if it added months to the schedule interfering with the deadlines for incentive award. I have never had threats or have been treated poorly over it, or encouraged to cut corners – never.

Thus I believe there are many organizations at Hanford that perform work in a very non-threatening way and the safety culture is apparent, frequently discussed and instilled in the work force.

However, I was shocked to learn of Dr. Tamosaitis experience, treatment and story. I had first heard of his experience reading the newspaper. As soon as I read the story, I called up a friend of mine, who is a senior manager at Hanford with many years of managerial experience, who is also a member of our schools engineering advisory board and who has guest lectured in one of my engineering classes for at least the last 15 years. I considered his input very trustworthy, so I called him on the phone and asked him: “Is Dr. Tamosaitis a good engineer or some kind of ‘trouble maker’, as I am thinking of inviting him to give a talk at our school.” The response I received from my engineering manager friend was that Dr. Tamosaitis was considered an honorable and trustworthy colleague who is in a responsible position and does good work, and someone who was recommended to speak to our engineering students.

So I called Dr. Tamosaitis and invited him to come over and give a talk at Walla Walla University, which he did on 2/9/2011. This talk is available to be seen over the internet at <http://www.wallawalla.edu/services/is/dl/20110209-190350-1/msh.htm> (note his slides may pop open in a new browser tab).

I found his talk to be outstanding and motivational to the students, but equally I found it frightening to the students – to see what can happen to an engineer who was simply doing what he believed to be the right thing! His termination for being a whistleblower and subsequent treatment is very discouraging and unfortunate. I found the third recommendation in the 2011-1 recommendation to DOE very encouraging, in that is said:

“3. Conduct a non-adversarial review of Dr. Tamosaitis' removal and his current treatment by both DOE and contractor management and how that is affecting the safety culture at WTP.”

This statement is encouraging to me for two reasons; it recommends both 1) a review of his removal and current treatment, and 2) its affect on safety culture.

Both are important, I have read in the DOE response to your recommendation that DOE will let Labor (DOL) be involved with the review of his removal and treatment, and will cooperate with DOL fully. While this may be necessary, I would encourage you to maintain the attitude expressed in the final “Recommendation” paragraph and encourage DOE to maintain its involvement as demonstrated by being “championed by the Secretary of Energy.” His removal and subsequent treatment should be reviewed at the highest levels within DOE, as such treatment must be discouraged by DOE in its contracts with the many contractors it uses to accomplish its mission.

Interestingly, during Dr. Tamosaitis’s talk, he explained at length about the Pulse Jet Mixers and explained that his concerns over that hardware were one of the reasons for his treatment. One of my senior students worked at a fabrication plant the last summer where they were fabricating the mixers. He told me after the talk that he remembers asking the workers at the fabrication facility about the mixers, and was told it was for Hanford but that it appeared to be a bad idea that was not likely going to work. This made the talk very interesting for him – as he was now discovering why.

In conclusion, Dr. Tamosaitis treatment must be reviewed, contractors must be significantly discouraged from attempting to replicate such treatment to other employees in the future, and the safety culture at the WTP must be improved to encourage proper design and analysis and remove threats of mistreatment when one challenges either.

Thanks you for considering my opinion.

Don Riley
Associate Professor Engineering
Walla Walla University.