

May 29, 2001

Mr. Fred E. Humes
Director
Economic Development Partnership
P.O. Box 1708
Aiken, SC 29802

Dear Mr. Humes:

Thank you for your letter of April 23, 2001, concerning the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board's (Board) Recommendation 2001-1, *High-Level Waste Management at the Savannah River Site*. Like you and those you represent in the Economic Development Partnership, the Board strives to support responsible and safe operation of defense nuclear facilities at the Savannah River Site (SRS). We strongly advocate expeditious clean up of nuclear wastes at SRS in a manner that provides for the protection of the health and safety of the public and the workers at SRS. With the proper management attention and the proper allocation of resources, the Department of Energy (DOE) and its contractors can safely satisfy the common goals of all parties interested in remediation of the hazards at SRS.

With regard to the management of high-level waste at SRS, the Board supports the operation of the Defense Waste Processing Facility (DWPF) to vitrify high-level waste sludges and would like to see DOE continue this operation without unnecessary shutdowns. However, the high-level waste system at SRS must support DWPF operations for another two to three decades, and a minimum acceptable condition for high-level waste storage must be established and maintained. Short-term fixes for waste storage that relax the safety margins could lead to the release of high-level waste. Not only could such a release cause insult to the safety of the workers, the public, and the environment, but it could also halt waste remediation activities, including DWPF, while recovery actions are pursued.

As you pointed out in your letter, worsening conditions in the tank farms make it imperative that DOE pursue a salt processing facility more aggressively. Such a facility would quickly free up tank space and allow for greater operational flexibility. Other initiatives, such as an evaporator at DWPF and the addition of waste storage capacity (i.e., new large or small tanks or return to service of existing tanks), could also alleviate the shortage of tank space. In the meantime, tank farm operations can be optimized by carefully balancing waste inflows with evaporator operations, and safety can be optimized by providing reliable containment for dispersible liquids while removing sludge for treatment. Consistent with this goal of safe storage of wastes, the SRS contractor, under the direction of DOE, has begun to remove the waste in Tank 6 to a level below all known leaks sites.

Your comments will be added to the Recommendation 2001-1 public record which is being maintained as required by 42 U.S.C. § 2286d(a). We appreciate and agree with your concern for continued risk reduction at SRS. The Board fully supports the efforts of DOE to achieve this goal. Enclosed for your information is the Board's latest letter to DOE on this subject.

Sincerely,

John T. Conway
Chairman

c: The Honorable Carolyn L. Huntoon
Mr. Mark B. Whitaker, Jr.
Mr. Greg Rudy

Enclosure