



Confederated Tribes and Bands  
of the Yakama Nation

Established by the  
Treaty of June 9, 1855

February 8, 2024

[Send via Email.](#)

Representative Chris Stearns  
Washington State House of Representatives  
JLOB 306 / P.O. Box 40600  
Olympia, WA 98504-0600

**RE: CLEAN-UP HANFORD BEFORE ADDING NUCLEAR FACILITIES AND CONTAMINANTS**

Dear Representative Stearns,

The U.S. Department of Energy's Hanford Nuclear Site ("Hanford") stands as a stark reminder of the consequences of nuclear activities on the environment and public health. Since the 1940s, this Site has accumulated radioactive ground contamination, stemming from a series of incidents involving leakage, improper waste disposal, and inadequate containment measures. The issues of clean-up at Hanford leave harmful and lasting impacts on the Yakama Nation's tribal resources, the Columbia River, the landscape, wildlife, and indigenous roots and plants.

Since time immemorial, the area that is known as Hanford has been sacred to the Yakama People. It is a place that provides traditional foods and medicines and is rich in culturally significant locations that identify Yakama Nation as a people. The Yakama Nation reserved rights to hunt, fish, and gather on these traditional lands in the Treaty of 1855. You must understand that these were not rights granted to us, but rather reserved by the Yakama Nation. Before the operations began at Hanford, Yakamas continued to practice our traditional ways on these lands. The unwritten laws obligate us to care for these ancestral lands and the resources it provides to the people. This Yakama Nation obligation to speak for the land and resources pre-dates the federal, state, and local activities at Hanford. The Yakama Nation has not had access to these lands due to the United States development of nuclear weapons. The Treaty-reserved rights still exist at Hanford and we fully expect that the site will be returned to a condition that it is a safe standard to allow Yakama members to participate in our Treaty-reserved practices and traditional cultural practices unencumbered.

The Yakama Nation does not oppose planning for a clean energy economy in response escalating climate crises, increasing wildfires, and numerous species in the Columbia River Fishery that are threatened or endangered – in fact the Yakama Nation expends significant governmental resources every year in response to degraded fish and wildlife habitats, lower water quality and higher stream temperatures, soil toxins, groundwater contaminants, and numerous other forms of pollution. For decades, the regional energy grid has grown at the expense of Yakama Nation's Treaty-reserved and



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tribal resources, which have sustained multiple waves of development burdens with insufficient protections to avoid or mitigate impacts and ensure that polluters clean up after themselves. Historically, extractive energy development has destroyed significant cultural and natural resources that the United States agreed to protect by Treaty. The Yakama Nation's message has been consistent, "when you're in a hole, stop digging." The Yakama Nation's ongoing participation and advocacy is to work in good faith towards development policies that avoid, protect, and perpetuate the underlying resources that need to be preserved.

At Hanford, the Yakama Nation has worked for decades to hold the federal government accountable for its environmental clean-up. In the instance of High Level Waste, the Department of Energy's solution was to create new definitions for contaminant thresholds so that more High Level Waste could be disposed at Hanford with weaker environmental protections. Inadequate radiation containment continues to contaminate the Hanford Site because of original storage structures were not designed to withstand the test of time or the corrosive effects of radioactive materials. As a result, deterioration and structural failures have occurred, allowing radioactive substances to migrate beyond designated storage areas and into the surrounding soil. Improper waste disposal or removal is also a contributor to the proliferation of nuclear pollution at Hanford. As a result, significant areas of the site remain contaminated with hazardous substances, posing ongoing risks to both human health and the natural environment.

Incidents of leakage have been an ongoing issue at Hanford and results in the seepage of radioactive materials into the surrounding environment. Additionally, the volume of radioactive substances stored at Hanford increases the scale of harm due to the risk of leakage, with each incident further compromising the integrity of containment systems. The cumulative impact of these factors creates a complex and multifaceted challenge for Hanford clean-up.

The Yakama Nation does not support discussions for new nuclear activities or nuclear pollutants while the Department of Energy continues to avoid meaningful clean-up at Hanford and adds to the overall contaminant load in violation of its obligations to Yakama Nation under the Treaty of 1855.

Respectfully,

*Gerry Lewis* 2-8-2024

Gerald Lewis, Chairman  
Yakama Nation Tribal Council