



**SNAKE RIVER
ALLIANCE**
IDAHO'S NUCLEAR WATCHDOG & CLEAN ENERGY ADVOCATE

PROTECT THE FUTURE NOW

Monday, January 14, 2019

By [Beatrice Brailsford](#)

Reprocessing is the must-take step between a nuclear reactor and a nuclear bomb, and is the source of some of the most dangerous waste on earth. During reprocessing, spent nuclear fuel from reactors is dissolved in acid so bomb ingredients – plutonium and highly enriched uranium – can be removed and used for weapons. Congress defined what's left – “the highly radioactive material resulting from the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel” – as high-level waste in the Nuclear Waste Policy Act (1982). Congress also mandated that high-level waste be disposed of in deep geologic repositories, isolated from the human biosphere.



More than 100 million gallons of liquid high-level waste are stored in buried tanks in Washington, South Carolina, and Idaho.

High-level waste was produced by the US nuclear weapons complex at the Hanford Reservation (WA), the Savannah River Site (SC), and the Idaho National Laboratory (INL). There is also high-level waste at West Valley (NY) that was produced in a commercial reprocessing facility. Much of INL's high-level waste has been calcined, or dried, and is stored in large, above ground stainless steel bins. Some, however, is still a liquid and is stored in buried tanks.

Safely managing high-level waste – let alone disposing of it – has proven to be one of the Department of Energy's most difficult jobs, one it has not always performed very well. For years, DOE has tried to change the definition of high-level waste so it can take shortcuts in how it is handled and disposed. The Trump administration DOE has now launched another all-out effort to fundamentally alter more than 50 years of national consensus on how high-level waste – the most toxic, radioactive, and dangerous waste in the world – is managed and ultimately disposed in geologic repositories.

DOE wants to “reinterpret” high-level waste so it can be abandoned in place or be put in shallow land burial. To move the goalposts in this way would endanger current and future generations who live near high-level waste sites in Washington, Idaho, and South Carolina or who live near sites that might be chosen, illegally, for high-level waste disposal, including the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant (NM).

DOE asked for public comments on the latest plan to change the rules. Eight public interest organizations, led by the Natural Resources Defense Council and including the Snake River Alliance, offered a [joint response](#): **DOE should withdraw its high-level waste reinterpretation proposal because it is contrary to law.** DOE has a Congressional mandate to protect the public and the environment from the long-term dangers posed by high-level waste. That mandate must be carried out and cannot be shirked or changed because it is too expensive or too difficult or because of technical or economic constraints. Doing so would violate Congress’s charge in the Nuclear Waste Policy Act. **DOE should focus its efforts on working with affected States, Tribes, and interested members of the public to ensure protective cleanup of the nuclear weapons complex.**