

Sen Murray rebukes DOE over Hanford budget

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By Annette Cary, Herald staff writer

The federal government is playing with fire by underfunding the Hanford budget for next year, an annoyed Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., said at a congressional hearing Wednesday.

"Are you proud of this budget?" she asked twice as James Rispoli, the Department of Energy's assistant secretary for environmental management, fielded questions at a hearing of the Senate Energy and Water Appropriations Subcommittee.

The Bush administration has acknowledged its fiscal year 2009 budget proposal would cause up to 23 legal deadlines to be missed at DOE cleanup sites, and up to 600 people could be laid off, Rispoli said.

If all of the deadlines are missed, DOE and its contractors could be liable for up to \$10 million in penalties, he said.

"I'm not just saddened by this budget request, I'm angered," Murray said.

The White House has proposed an unacceptably low budget, believing that Congress will do the difficult work of increasing it, she said. But if Congress does increase the overall budget, President Bush will veto it, she said.

Layoffs likely will be required this summer at Hanford because of the Bush administration's low budget proposal. Then, if Congress succeeds in increasing the budget, those workers will have to be found and hired back, she said.

"These jobs are dangerous ... and we have to have people who are highly skilled doing them," she said.

Subcommittee Chairman Byron Dorgan said that despite a rising DOE budget, the allocation for cleaning up contaminated sites such as Hanford has been reduced in the administration's budget request for the fourth straight year.

Rispoli pointed out that at the beginning of the Bush administration, Hanford was receiving \$1.2 billion a year and that budget has grown to \$2 billion a year.



However, \$690 million is being used for a new project, construction of Hanford's vitrification plant.

Among changes to the proposed 2009 budget is a \$77 million cut for cleanup of Hanford along the Columbia River, a project that is making admirable progress, Murray said.

"I don't understand why we are going to pull the rug out from under a high performing project," Murray said.

DOE is prepared to negotiate with the state if it believes cleaning up the river corridor should be a higher priority than other work, Rispoli said.

"That's not fair to dump it on the state," Murray said.

She told Rispoli that DOE has a moral and legal obligation to clean up waste and contamination at Hanford.