

The Seattle Times

‘Ground zero’ for whistleblowing? Not D.C., but the Hanford nuclear site in Washington state.

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1 of 4 | Tom Mueller’s new book, “Crisis of Conscience: Whistleblowing in an Age of Fraud,” includes a lengthy chapter on the Hanford nuclear... (courtesy of Tom Mueller)



By

[Hal Bernton](#)

Seattle Times staff reporter

In 2010, nuclear engineer Donna Busche warned of the risks of a disastrous radioactive explosion at a Hanford site waste-treatment plant, then under construction. She insisted on the need for a “hazard review” that would cause costly delays for her employer, a federal Energy Department contractor. And she refused to back down even after what she says was intense workplace harassment that ended with her firing for “unprofessional conduct.”

Busche testified before a federal nuclear-safety board, met with U.S. senators and helped to [launch a lawsuit](#) against two major Hanford contractors alleging the multibillion-dollar project failed to meet rigorous nuclear quality standards.

“The impact on your personal life is hell,” Busche said. “People who I thought were my friends, I found out they are not my friends.”

In taking these steps, Busche became a Hanford whistleblower, one of hundreds of people who through the decades have raised alarms about waste, fraud and safety problems at the massive cleanup operations of the south central Washington federal site that once produced the plutonium for U.S. nuclear weapons.

“Hanford is ground zero for whistleblowing in America,” said Tom Mueller, [author of “Crisis of Conscience,”](#) a sweeping new chronicle of the nation’s whistleblowers, the difficulties they have faced and the wrongdoing they have exposed. “It has all the key factors ... You have corporate power. You have government. You have huge amounts of money, and secrecy. Time and time again, taxpayer dollars are misspent.”

Mueller, whose book devotes a lengthy chapter to Hanford, is scheduled to appear at 7 p.m. Wednesday at Seattle’s [Elliott Bay Book Company](#) during a week when whistleblowing against President Donald Trump commands center stage in the nation’s capital. Mueller will be accompanied by Busche and Tom Carpenter, executive director of Hanford Challenge, a Seattle-based watchdog group that assists whistleblowers.

The federal Energy Department, reached by The Seattle Times, declined to comment on the Hanford chapter of Mueller’s book.

Mueller began his research during the Obama administration. The former president comes under tough scrutiny in the book for attempts to squelch defense and intelligence whistleblowing that led to nine prosecutions under the Espionage Act.

The book was published this month in a very different political era when U.S. House of Representatives impeachment proceedings put a fresh spotlight on the whistleblowing actions of a U.S. intelligence official who wrote an anonymous complaint detailing Trump’s attempt to pressure Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy to investigate former Vice President Joseph Biden. This whistleblower has been hailed by some Democrats as a hero, while Trump, in recorded remarks, denounced the individual as fake, highly partisan and “almost a spy.”

Mueller said that Trump uses a common tactic for combating whistleblowers that attempts to shift the focus from the message to the messenger.

“The goal is to undercut the credibility of the person when the facts are difficult to dispute,” he said.

Blowing the whistle

Many Hanford whistleblowers are known to those who they accuse of wrongdoing. That’s because they first air their grievances within their agency — or firms — and thus expose themselves to retaliation from those who feel threatened.

They are people like Busche, a native of Fort Worth, Texas. In 2009, she went to work at Hanford as a manager of environmental and nuclear safety for URS, then a subcontractor to Bechtel National, the corporation hired by the Energy Department to build a massive complex to process 56 million gallons of chemical and radioactive wastes held [in 177 aging storage tanks](#).

In a tense 2010 meeting, Busche observed a senior URS nuclear-engineering colleague, [Walt Tamosaitis](#), clash with another contracting official over two long lists of unresolved technical problems in the design of a plant to pretreat wastes.

As the two men argued, she picked up Tamosaitis’ lists and was stunned by the gravity of the design challenges. They included a problem with mixing wastes that created the potential for a buildup of hydrogen gas and plutonium that could trigger a major explosion. “I just sat there dumbfounded ... I thought to myself ... This project is way, way worse than I thought,” she would later tell Mueller.

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Busche felt she was legally bound to investigate these problems. But such an action could put at risk millions of dollars of an incentive payment that the contracting companies stood to collect for completing tasks on schedule in a project estimated — at that time — to cost more than \$12 billion.

Senior URS officials launched a counterattack, removing Tamosaitis from his supervisory position and then from any involvement in the project. They told Busche not to investigate his concerns, and she faced increased harassment after she publicly testified about the safety problems during October 2010 hearings convened by the Defense Nuclear Facilities Safety Board, according to her account in Mueller’s book.

By July 2011, URS had hired a consultant to interview Busche about her work, something that she said was portrayed as a kind of team-building exercise.

But the consultant’s notes from that meeting — later obtained through litigation and published in Mueller’s book — unleashed a withering attack on Busche. They labeled her a “lit fuse that could explode at any moment.” The consultant wrote that another whistleblowing incident could

shut down the waste-treatment plant project in a “disaster for URS!” and declared that she “must not work at Hanford.”

In February 2014, Busche lost her job, less than a year after Tamosaitis was fired. In a statement released to CBS News at the time, URS disputed that Busche had suffered retaliation and said her termination was not related to her “purported concerns.”

By then, the Obama administration’s Energy Department had issued a “stop work” order on the pretreatment plant. And Busche, Tamosaitis and a federal official named Gary Brunson had filed a federal False Claims Act lawsuit that accused URS and Bechtel of providing deficient goods and services to the Energy Department.

When the U.S. Justice Department opts to pursue such a case, the whistleblowers can receive a portion of any settlement or judgment. The U.S. Attorney’s Office of Eastern Washington joined this lawsuit, and in November 2016 announced a settlement with the contractors Bechtel and AECOM (which by then had acquired URS).

The two contractors agreed to pay a total of \$125 million while admitting no wrongdoing.

The shares of the settlement received by the three whistleblowers were not disclosed. Their combined take would likely have ranged from 15 to 30% of the total payment, depending on factors such as the quantity and quality of information they provided.

Mueller said the size of the trio’s financial payouts from the settlement was unusual among whistleblower lawsuits.

“The vast majority ... of whistleblower lawsuits for fraud do not succeed in court, or what they do get is eaten up by lawyer’s fees and taxes ... It is a lousy business model,” Mueller said.

Life after whistleblowing

Today, the work at the pretreatment plant still is halted. In the meantime, the Energy Department and contractors are developing an alternative approach for the startup of waste processing scheduled to begin by 2022.

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Busche and Tamosaitis continue to live in the Tri-Cities area of Washington, where they both occasionally get calls from other Hanford whistleblowers seeking advice.

Tamosaitis, 72, describes himself as a company man who hoped to spend 50 years at his job. He now devotes much of his time to restoring vintage cars in a garage that he has expanded into a workshop.

“It’s a long, hard and lonely battle,” said Tamosaitis, who prefers the term “person of conscience” to whistleblower and is supportive of Trump in his current battle against the complaint filed by the anonymous Washington intelligence official. “I think that Trump had done one hell of a good job, and the Democrats can’t accept that,” he said.

Busche, 56, takes a very different view of Trump’s conduct. She says it is “incredibly disturbing to her” that he attacks the whistleblower and demands to meet with him.

In her postwhistleblowing life, Busche has built a new house with her husband, Jim, and spends more time on photography.

“The last four years have just been healing my soul,” Busche says. “I’m moving on.”

Clarification: This story was updated Nov. 7, 2019, to attribute the description of intense workplace harassment to Donna Busche. The story also was updated to include a 2014 rebuttal to Busche by her former employer, URS.

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