



"A Chernobyl waiting to happen." The Hanford Site is the most toxic place in America.

Jessica Staveley
7/06/2019



© getty

A group of men watch as one weighs uranium bars in Hanford. Image: Getty. Following the release of HBO's new miniseries, [Chernobyl](#), the world's worst nuclear disaster is back in the spotlight once again.

The accident, which occurred in the early morning hours of April 26, 1986, resulted in [116,000 people being evacuated from their homes](#).

Today, 33 years on from the disaster, [the death toll from the Chernobyl disaster is still unknown](#).

But in the United States, there's another nuclear threat that's been described as "the most toxic place in America" and "an underground Chernobyl waiting to happen".

The Hanford Nuclear Site in Washington state is known as the most contaminated place in the entire Western Hemisphere.

The nuclear site, which is now decommissioned and known as the most toxic nuclear dump in the US, is where the US Federal Government started producing plutonium for the Manhattan Project.

For 45 years, during the Cold War, production continued at the site. In fact, plutonium produced at Hanford was even used to fuel the nuclear bomb dropped on Nagasaki in 1945.

Finally, in 1989, production stopped at the plant and the arduous cleanup process began.

Decades later, Hanford is in the midst of America's largest ever nuclear waste clean-up operation – and there's still a long way to go.

The clean-up process, which is currently stalled, may continue until the 2080's and it's expected to cost US taxpayers more than \$100 billion.

But that's not the only problem at Hanford.

At Hanford, 211 million litres of nuclear liquid waste is buried in underground tanks – and its effects are already becoming clear.

In November 2016, [NBC News](#) interviewed a group of current and former Hanford workers who believe they were exposed to toxic materials while working at the site.

One man, an athletic 35-year-old who had never smoked in his life, told *NBC* that he had come down with a debilitating lung disease usually linked to smoking after he briefly inhaled a bizarre odour at Hanford.

"I started having breathing problems," Seth Ellingsworth said. "And it hasn't gone away since."

Although the underground tanks were designed to hold the nuclear waste inside of them for many years, more than three million litres of waste has already leaked into the soil, with vapours from the leaking tanks emitting toxic and radioactive chemicals into the air.

In 2016 alone, it was reported that at least 61 workers had been exposed to the toxic vapours known to cause cancer as well as brain and lung damage.

"Our lives don't matter," Ellingsworth added. "Our health does not matter. We are simply a business decision. It costs more money to protect us than to fight us, to deal with us being sick."

NBC spoke to a number of other workers dealing with a range of illnesses following their time working at Hanford.

Diana Gregg, a former worker at the plant, told *NBC* that she now has dementia.

"I have shaking on the right side of my body," she said.

Another worker, Lonny Poteat, shared that he had been diagnosed with nerve damage after working at the plant for several years.

"Sometimes the pain gets so great, I just pass out," he told *NBC*.

Local watchdog group, The Hanford Challenge, also told *NBC* that at least three deaths in recent years have been linked to Hanford, including Gary Sall, who died in 2011 after descending into dementia.

Local neuropsychologist, Brian Campbell, echoed the watchdog, adding that he had evaluated at least 29 people at Hanford with both respiratory and cognitive symptoms, including "some of the worst cases of dementia that I've seen in young people, which we do not anticipate".

Although there is an undoubtedly an immediate risk to the workers on site, investigative reporter [Susannah Frame](#) reported that the risks at Hanford may go far beyond just the plant's workers.

In fact, according to Frame, there's a risk that an underground tank could explode and contaminate a much larger area.

"If you care about people that are doing the work of this country that is needed so that we don't have a nuclear disaster, you should care about Hanford," she said.

[Pictures: Chernobyl: The Disaster and the Aftermath Slideshow](#)