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Critics Decry Proposed Cuts in Hanford Nuclear Cleanup Plan

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SPOKANE, Wash. — Advocates for cleaning up a former nuclear weapons production site in Washington state are outraged that the Trump administration is proposing a \$700 million budget cut next year.

The proposal released Monday by President Donald Trump called for cutting the annual Hanford cleanup budget from about \$2.5 billion to about \$1.8 billion.

Critics say that large a cut is almost certain to delay the cleanup, which is on a legally-enforced schedule.

"This budget proposal would gut the cleanup and goes in the wrong direction," said Tom Carpenter, director of Hanford Challenge, a Seattle-based watchdog group.

The Hanford Nuclear Reservation, located near Richland, Washington, was created by the Manhattan Project during World War II as the nation raced to create nuclear weapons. Hanford produced the plutonium for the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki, Japan, that effectively ended World War II. Richland is 200 miles (321 kilometers) southeast of Seattle.

During the Cold War, Hanford produced about two-thirds of the plutonium for the nation's nuclear arsenal, resulting in the nation's largest collection of highly toxic radioactive waste.

Cleaning up that waste has been the main mission at the site since 1989, and experts say decades of work remains. The General Accountability Office has estimated it would cost about \$3 billion a year to adhere to a legal agreement between the state and federal governments that sets deadlines for the cleanup.

Trump and previous presidents have routinely proposed cutting the Hanford budget, which have been opposed by the state's congressional delegation.

"Unfortunately the federal government doesn't get its cleanup obligation out there," Carpenter said.

He noted the Trump budget proposes a 25% increase to make additional nuclear weapons.

"They are taking away from cleanup to restart the nuclear arms race," Carpenter said.

Republican Rep. Dan Newhouse, who represents the Hanford region, said the federal government has an obligation to clean up the radioactive waste at places like Hanford.

"I will continue to work with the administration and with our senators to restore funding levels and get the job done," Newhouse said.

Earlier this month, Hanford officials announced that the sprawling Plutonium Finishing Plant had been largely cleaned up. But that still left some 56 million gallons (212 million liters) of radioactive and hazardous waste stored in 177 underground tanks that must be dealt with.

The Plutonium Finishing Plant, which operated from 1949 to 1989 and comprised some 90 buildings, produced hockey-puck sized buttons of plutonium that were shipped off-site to be installed in nuclear weapons. It took 20 years to clean and demolish that plant.