

Tri-City Herald

‘Sad and disheartening.’ WA attorney general visits Tri-Cities to support ill Hanford workers

[By Cameron Probert](#)

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The Washington state Attorney General Bob Ferguson brought his promise to fight for Hanford workers to the Tri-Cities this week.

He is calling on President Joe Biden’s administration [to drop a challenge](#) to a Washington state law making it easier for Hanford employees to get worker’s compensation if they’re sick.

He brought about a dozen Hanford workers along with union officials and the head of a Hanford watchdog group to a Thursday news conference. They called on Biden’s administration to drop an appeal challenging the law.

The law passed with wide bipartisan support in 2018 and required the state Department of Labor and Industries to presume that a wide variety of illnesses were linked to working at Hanford.

Prior to the bill, Hanford workers needed to show the illnesses were caused by their work at the nuclear reservation site.

The process of proving that often was long and expensive for Hanford workers, Ferguson said.

And several of them said they faced harassment and threats as they tried challenging it.

After the law passed, President Donald Trump’s administration challenged it, and lost both at the U.S. District Court and at the Ninth District Court of Appeals.

Now the Biden administration is asking for the U.S. Supreme Court to review the rule.

Ferguson promised to fight the challenge.

“I have to believe that President Biden, who claims to support workers, was never consulted on this,” Ferguson said. “This could all come to an end with a really simple decision.”

Sad and disheartening

Before the news conference, Bertolla Bugarin told Ferguson that this was another fight.

Bugarin and her husband, Abe Garza, have been part of [the fight for the law](#) since a hearing at the Legislature.

When she learned about the Biden administration's appeal, she had to sit down.

"It's sad and disheartening," she said. "But I have faith in the attorney general, the union and Tom (Carpenter of Hanford Challenge.)"

Garza had worked in the tank farms for 34 years, and his health is slowly deteriorating, they said. He often found himself confused and struggling to read. Then one day, some apparently toxic gases drifted into the area where Garza was working.

"Then all the way home there was like a metallic taste in my mouth," he said. "Then the following day, I had stuff in my lungs and I was having problems breathing."

At the emergency room, doctors thought was having a heart attack, he said. After testing, they found the problem was with his lungs.

Bugarin knew it was going to be trouble because she had seen each time he had been hospitalized. Each time, he had stayed longer.

They had to go to court to get compensation, Bugarin said.

"If they have their way, we get sick out there, and then they bring you back in to work, and then they fire you because you can't do the work," he said.

Both the union and Carpenter made similar calls to the Biden administration to drop the appeal.

Carpenter said the state recognized the price workers sometimes paid for being on the front lines of cleaning up one of the worst contaminated facilities in the United States.

"The law's passage was in part motivated by the testimony of some of the folks here, and other Hanford workers who have become sick with serious and long-term illnesses solely from exposure to toxic vapors from Hanford nuclear waste," he said.

Nick Bumpaous from the local Plumbers and Steamfitters union, also echoed that the law provided basic protections for workers to make sure that they have access to healthcare.

"To be clear, this is a matter of life and death," he said. "Workers are suffering from devastating ailments, all too often dying in the course of their service to the nation. And no philosophical dispute should ever overshadow this stark reality."