

**Industry news** ▼**DOE Terminates BNFL  
Hanford Tank Waste Contract**

In the wake of huge projected cost overruns for the Hanford tank waste vitrification project, in early May Energy Secretary Bill Richardson terminated the Energy Department's privatization contract with BNFL Inc. Under the contract termination, BNFL will be paid between \$200 million and \$300 million for work already done on project design.

Cost estimates for the project rose from \$6.9 billion at the time the contract was signed in August 1998 to \$15.2 billion in April 2000 (see "Headlines," *Radwaste Solutions*, May/June 2000, p. 8). Much of the increase was due to the high cost of borrowing money, since under terms of the privatization contract, BNFL would not be paid until it delivered its first vitrified waste to the DOE.

The DOE, however, is keeping BNFL's partner Bechtel to continue the design work on the vitrification facility through the end of 2000. By that time, the DOE plans to select a new design-and-construction contractor, under more traditional government funding. This new contractor would begin building the facility in 2001.

CH2M Hill Hanford Group, which manages Hanford's 177 underground tanks, has said it had no interest in bidding for the vitrification facility design-and-construction contract, but that it was interested in operating the facility once construction is complete. Under the DOE's master plan, one company will eventually be put in charge of managing both the tanks and the vitrification plants.

**Nuclear Waste Safe  
in Wake of Los Alamos Fire;  
Runoff Damage Feared in Rainy Season**

Los Alamos National Laboratory's radwaste storage areas were not harmed by the fire that swept over the national laboratory grounds in mid-May, according to Dennis Erickson, the lab's Safety and Health Division director, speaking during a special session at the recent American Nuclear Society Annual Meeting in San Diego.

The New Mexico fire, which started on May 4 as the result of a prescribed burn at the nearby Banderliel National Monument, reached lab grounds on May 11, resulting in the evacuation of the town of Los Alamos and the closing of the lab for some two weeks. Operations at the lab resumed May 22.

As a result of the fire, some 48 000 acres burned, the largest fire ever in New Mexico. In the town of Los Alamos,

220 home structures (410 living units) were destroyed. On the lab grounds, some 9000 acres (30 percent of the site) were burned, and there was significant damage to lab structures and equipment in many areas.

However, not all the impacts of the fire were negative, noted Erickson. "Throughout the rest of the state, Los Alamos has always been considered an implant," he said. "But during this period, we joined the state of New Mexico."

Federal, state, and lab officials are now concerned about runoff damage during the coming rainy season (July through early September). A burned watershed yields more runoff (possibly up to 100 times normal), and the canyons on lab grounds, which already have the highest potential for radionuclide contamination from previous lab operations, also have the highest potential for runoff after the fire, reported David Rogers, from the lab's Water Quality and Hydrology Group. While the lab feels that contaminant amounts do not constitute a health risk, mitigation efforts for flow reduction are under study, and the lab is looking at removal of possible contaminants or reinforcement of canyon walls to prevent any radionuclide migration.

● A late June brush fire on and near the Hanford Reservation blackened some 190 000 acres and

burned across three old radioactive waste disposal sites (a low-level waste trench and two dried-up ponds). Federal and state officials, however, said initial surveys showed no elevated radiation levels. The fire also threatened some excavated drums containing uranium wastes, but firefighters were able to stop the advance.

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**Progress on Two Fronts  
for Private Fuel Storage**

Private Fuel Storage LLC has moved closer to its goal of establishing a temporary spent-fuel storage facility in Tooele County, Utah. PFS, a consortium of eight utilities with nuclear power plants, plans to operate the facility on the reservation of the Skull Valley Band of Goshute Indians, located some 40 miles southwest of Salt Lake City.

In late April a federal appeals court dismissed a lawsuit brought by the state of Utah and dissenting members of the Tribe who oppose the private spent-fuel storage venture. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Dis-