

Whistleblower Letter Undercuts Nuclear Plant Managers' Credibility

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Side-by-side comparisons of the GE boiling water nuclear reactors at the Columbia Generating Station (left) and at Fukushima (right) reveal a similar design. Photos courtesy of CLUI (left) and Fukushima Update (right).

The Columbia Generating Station, a GE boiling water reactor of similar design to the faulty reactors that melted down in Fukushima, Japan, has been operating on the Hanford Nuclear Reservation for the last 33 years. It has been under fire since the Fukushima accident in 2011 as critics, including Oregon PSR, have called for its closure.

The plant's operator, Energy Northwest, a consortium of 27 Washington public power utilities formerly known as the Washington Public Power Supply System (WPPSS – pronounced “whoops”), has circled the wagons, putting forward a relentless stream of positive public relations stories to the press. This united wall of support suffered an enormous crack when an anonymous letter was sent to board members and the press. The letter claims to have been written by a group of the nuclear power plant's workers, charging that management has been hiding a serious decline in safety and operating efficiency at the plant.

Here is an excerpt of [the story as reported by Annette Cary](#) on January 29th of this year in the *Tri-City Herald*:

The...letter...reminds board members that Energy Northwest was rated as one of two nuclear plants in the nation in greatest need of operational and human performance improvement in 2010.

Its [Institute of Nuclear Power Operations] INPO index rating improved as a new leadership team...was put to work. However, the improvement was not sustained, the letter said.

“We have seen a steady decline of the index with a return to low levels,” the letter said, adding that the plant has ranked in the bottom 25 of the nation's 99 operating commercial reactors since the end of July.

That coincides with the conclusion of a refueling outage that was planned to be longer than usual. Energy Northwest's intent was to improve productivity long-term, but the longer outage would reduce productivity short-term.

However, the outage had unanticipated consequences. It lasted longer than planned, and the plant was operated at reduced power for several weeks after the outage as a stuck valve was repaired. Index points also were lost because of worker exposure to radiation.

By September, the plant's INPO rating had dropped to the 85th worst in the nation, the letter said.

Three months later, employees were told it then was ranked among the bottom 25 plants because of two pinhole fuel leaks discovered in the fall, according to the letter.

The letter accuses management of keeping the plant online at all costs, pointing to the decision to continue operating at 65 percent power during the valve repair. Unwanted material that got into the reactor core during the valve repair may have been responsible for the pinhole leaks.

Board Members Furious, Oregon PSR Seeks to Take Advantage

At a special meeting of the 11-member Energy Northwest Executive Board held on January 26th, the board decided to hire a special investigator to look into the lengthy and detailed charges contained in the whistleblowers' 3-page letter. A very cranky board met the next day, with many members complaining about being excluded from the previous night's meeting and skeptical of CEO Mark Reddemann's explanation that he and his staff had not hidden the declining performance of the nuclear plant from the board, but had merely been communicating it differently and, in hindsight, perhaps had not explained that well enough.

Three and a half years of active work by Oregon and Washington PSR's Joint Task Force on Nuclear Power in investigating and presenting reports on seismic dangers, costs, plant design problems, and radioactive waste storage hazards did less to damage the reputation of the CGS than this letter did in one day at the Energy Northwest board meeting. Our reports gained credibility among the utility leaders that govern the operation of that plant.

The whistleblower letter, along with the economic reality that this plant, which is aging and in constant need of repair - and is not cost effective in today's glutted and low-priced energy market - is signaling the beginning of the end of the Columbia Generating Station. We will be doing all we can to hasten the end of this dangerous reactor, and we will be calling on you to help us in protecting the Columbia River and the Mid-Columbia Basin from a nuclear disaster.

For more information on how you can get involved, contact Chuck Johnson, Director of Oregon and Washington PSR's Joint Task Force on Nuclear Power, at 503-777-2794 or at chuck@oregonpsr.org.