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FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Inez Austin Timeline

Description

A timeline of events pertaining to Inez Austin's whistleblowing to protect public safety at the Hanford nuclear cleanup site and her subsequent problems with the Westinghouse Hanford Company and the U.S. Department of Energy.

Body

- 1979 -- Inez Austin is hired by Westinghouse.
- 1989 -- Austin becomes senior process engineer at Westinghouse Hanford Company.
- May 15, 1989 -- Tri-Party Agreement signed between U.S. Department of Energy (DOE), U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and Washington State Department of Ecology for the cleanup of the hazardous and nuclear waste at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation.
- October 1989 -- The U.S. Senate assesses that the presence of ferrocyanide can be highly explosive under specific conditions and should be pumped dry to prevent explosion.
- February 1990 -- Austin is named to the Hanford Readiness Review Board for single-shell tanks, a panel that must approve of major projects before they begin.
- June 1990 -- Austin is asked to submit a proposal for pumping dangerous combinations of liquid wastes and ferrocyanide out of five single-shell tanks in order to stabilize the tanks.
- June 25, 1990 -- Austin's draft proposal is returned for her signature of approval. The returned document lacks her safety cautions regarding the pumping of two potentially dangerous tanks.

- June 27, 1990 -- Austin is pressured to sign the document and certify the safety of the pumping procedure. She refuses and resigns from the Readiness Review Board.
- July 1, 1990 -- The established deadline for pumping these tanks according to the Tri-party Agreement.
- October 11, 1990 -- Austin files a formal complaint of on-the-job harassment with the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL).
- November 11, 1990 -- Westinghouse management institutes a program at Hanford to encourage employees to raise safety, environmental, and health concerns.
- December 4, 1990 -- Austin agrees to drop the complaint she filed with the DOL. In return, Westinghouse management drops the reprimand she received, purges her work file of derogatory material, raises her past year's performance rating, and gives her a month of paid leave and a salary increase.
- July 31, 1991 -- The DOE inspector general finds that security personnel at Westinghouse Hanford illegally acquired and used surveillance equipment against employees.
- January 1991-October 1993 -- Austin receives almost no technical assignments. She is regularly subjected to harassment, exclusion from meetings, surveillance, and other retaliations.
- February 1992 -- Austin receives the AAAS Scientific Freedom and Responsibility Award "for her courageous and persistent efforts to pre-empt potential safety hazards."
- October 7, 1993 -- Austin calls a press conference to publicize her lack of work assignments in the nearly three years since her settlement with Westinghouse Hanford. From this point on, she is again assigned work.
- October 2, 1995 -- Austin informs her boss that Hanford is currently violating two laws, one federal and one state, by letting untrained employees into certain restricted areas and not pumping out tank 240-S-151.
- October 6, 1995 -- The company issues its official position on the training matter in agreement with Austin's warning. However, harassment against her increases.
- February 5, 1996 -- Austin faxes a letter to Secretary of Energy Hazel O'Leary documenting the harassment and asking for help. She receives no reply.
- February 28, 1996 -- Austin is informed that her job has been posted while she was on vacation.
- March 1, 1996 -- Austin turns in her badge and leaves Hanford for the last time.

- April 17, 1996 -- Austin meets with Hazel O'Leary. O'Leary tells her that her termination will be put on hold and that she will continue to receive her paycheck. This does not actually happen, and Austin takes her case to the DOL.
- October 1, 1996 -- Westinghouse Hanford is replaced by Fluor Daniel as the prime contractor at the Hanford Site.
- October 1996 -- DOL finds in favor of Austin and Westinghouse agrees to pay 7 months back pay.
- December 9, 1996 -- In a letter to Hazel O'Leary, Austin rejects the settlement and documents the insufficiency of the offer.
- September 5, 1997 -- Austin files suit against Westinghouse Hanford for harassment and wrongful termination.
- June 8, 1998 -- Washington Governor Gary Locke announces that he is suing the federal government for its failure to stay on schedule with the Hanford clean-up timetable.
- November 2000 -- After the judge throws out the harassment claims, a Benton County Superior Court jury decides in favor of Westinghouse, saying that Austin was not fired. Austin appeals, but eventually drops her case when she settles amicably with Westinghouse.
- October 2005 -- Austin says, "I can't see how I could have done anything differently and believe me I have had time to think about it."

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Case Study / Scenario