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FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Inez Austin - Hanford whistleblower settles: Harassment claim spurs review of tank reports

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Description

An article from the Tri-City Herald about Inez Austin on December 5, 1990.

Body

(An article from the Tri-City Herald about Inez Austin.)

The president of Westinghouse Hanford said Tuesday there's no merit to a Hanford whistleblower's allegations that company officials tried to pull her security clearance. Roger Nichols made the comment during a press conference called to announce an agreement with Inez Austin, a tank farm worker who claims she was harassed for raising safety concerns. In exchange for several concessions, including a new performance evaluation, a new job and a month off with pay, Austin has

agreed not to "participate in any legal action" against Westinghouse Hanford Co. Austin also has withdrawn her request for a Department of Labor investigation into her allegations. "I feel real positive," Austin said Tuesday night. "They were dealing in good faith and they are willing to look at my complaints." "They are going to audit the (readiness review reports) we were working on and I'm sure they are going to do a good job These are good, positive steps. Now we need to get back to work and do the right thing," she added. The readiness review reports are at center of Austin's allegations She claims she was harassed after refusing to approve a readiness review of plans to pump sludge from waste tanks treated with a potentially explosive chemical called ferrocyanide.

The company admits no wrongdoing, Nichols said. He appointed Mike Korenko, vice president of engineered systems, to investigate Austin's allegations that she was harassed by some Westinghouse managers. Westinghouse wanted to reach a quick agreement to take the issue out of the public eye, Nichols said The results of Korenko's investigation "may or may not" be made public, he added. "In no way should today's agreement be construed as judging the merits of this case It doesn't judge the merits of the issues Inez raised or the actions taken by her management," Nichols said. Austin said this weekend that she was threatened with dismissal, received a written reprimand, was ordered to undergo a psychological evaluation and subjected to verbal harassment after she refused to authorize work on two potentially explosive storage tanks. Then on Monday, she told reporters that she had just learned of an attempt to pull her top "Q" level clearance Nichols and other company officials said they have determined there was no such attempt to remove Austin's security clearance.

The incident that led Austin to make the new allegation stemmed from a routine annual review of all security clearances at Hanford, company spokesman John Burk said. Westinghouse managers were supposed to turn in by Friday letters declaring whether their employees still held jobs requiring a security clearance A call went to Austin's manager, and a lot of other managers, reminding them that the letters were due, Burk said. Burk said he received one of the calls because he hadn't sent a letter regarding one of his employees in public relations According to Nichols, the reminder to Austin's manager is better termed "a favor" than harassment. Burk questioned the fairness of Austin's decision to raise the new allegation about her security clearance Monday night, after normal business hours As a result, Westinghouse didn't have an adequate opportunity to investigate and respond to Austin's claim

before it was publicized, he said. Austin continued to sound skeptical of Westinghouse's explanation. "I find this security thing a bizarre coincidence, but I'm willing to give them the benefit of the doubt," she said. Nichols told reporters that Hanford's transition from defense production to cleanup drove his decision to quickly resolve Austin's case "To be successful in this new era, we need our employees to uncover problems of the past and to bring safety, environmental and quality concerns to management's attention." Now is not the time to send our employees the wrong messages about our desire to have them raise concerns Whatever the merits of this case, we believe that continuing this public debate undermines our efforts to make every Westinghouse Hanford employee understand that we want to hear their concerns," Nichols added.

Nichols announced a new plan to provide outside review when workers believe their concerns have not been addressed adequately by the company's internal programs. Any worker who is unsatisfied with the company's response to safety concerns can request an "ad hoc peer review" by a panel of outside experts, Nichols said. Recently, Westinghouse launched a new program to encourage workers to come forward with concerns The program includes a new performance evaluation system that will give higher ratings to employees who raise safety issues and downgrade managers who fail to respond. "Our employees do have a number of other avenues to raise concerns outside the management chain if necessary," Nichols said. "I am troubled that some employees aren't using these avenues or don't trust the system." Austin's allegations of harassment are not unique. Her attorney, Tom Carpenter of the Washington, D.C.-based Government Accountability Project, said he represents four other Hanford workers who make similar charges about harassment.

On Sept. 28, Christine Gregoire, director of the state Department of Ecology, wrote Hanford Manager John Wagoner, alleging that several Westinghouse employees contacted state officials with "significant" safety concerns. "During our discussions, a disturbingly recurrent theme has been ostracism and harassment experienced by these employees subsequent to their raising safety concerns to the attention of (Westinghouse) management," Gregoire said. The terms of Westinghouse's agreement with Austin include:

- Removing a letter of reprimand from Austin's file.
- Allowing Austin to purge from her files any derogatory information pertaining to the tank safety issue.

- Back pay for some vacation and sick leave taken during the four months when she says she was harassed.
- A choice of transfers to a new job in the company.
- \$5,000 in attorney fees.
- A month off with pay, beginning today.

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