



Photo courtesy of Wilson Wewa

Seekseequa officially dedicated its fire hall this past month. On hand for the ribbon-cutting were Brenda Scott, Wilson Wewa, Geraldine Jim, Fire Chief Dan Martinez, Chief Operations Office Lauraina Hintsala, Hamilton Greeley, and Councilwoman Carol Wewa.

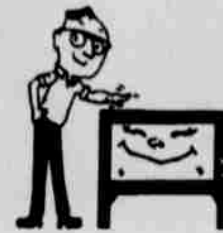
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## Court: Too soon to rule on sludge

### Decision overturns tribes' position on Hanford waste

YAKIMA (AP) - A federal appeals court ruled last week that it was too early to decide whether the Energy Department should be allowed to leave radioactive sludge in underground tanks in Washington state instead of shipping it to a central repository.

The ruling last Friday overturns a lower-court ruling in the lawsuit brought by environmental groups and American Indian tribes. The lawsuit claimed mixing the sludge and combining it with concrete grout - as the government plans for Idaho, South Carolina and Washington state - could endanger groundwater and rivers.

The Energy Department maintains that some highly radioactive residue in the waste tanks is too expensive to extract. The department has proposed reclassifying it as less dangerous, combining it with grout and leaving it in place.

Although the lawsuit cites all three states, only Washington state is affected by the ruling because Congress approved a measure this year allowing the reclassification for South Carolina and Idaho.

Friday's ruling overturns a decision last year by a federal judge in Idaho who barred the Energy Department from reclassifying the waste.

Washington and several other states filed "friend of the court" briefs to the appellate court, asking it to uphold the Idaho judge's decision.

The appeals court panel said it was too soon to determine if the Energy Department's plans violated the 1982 Nuclear Waste Policy Act. Waiting would not be a greater danger "than the one already imposed by our high-level-waste Frankenstein," said the three-judge panel of the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

Elliott Negin, spokesman for the Natural Resources Defense Council, denied that the ruling was a defeat for the environmental group. "All it said is that the timing is off," he said.

Colleen French, an Energy Department spokeswoman, said the agency was reviewing the ruling and would not comment.

As much as 100 million gallons of nuclear waste were stored over the years in 239

tanks in the three states. Some of it has been removed and processed for permanent disposal, but about 85 million gallons remain to be processed.

Critics contended that leaving any waste in those tanks will threaten the Columbia River at south-central Washington's Hanford site, as well as the Snake River aquifer under the Idaho National Engineering and Environmental Laboratory and the groundwater at the Savannah River Site in South Carolina.

About 53 million gallons of highly radioactive waste from World War II and Cold War-era plutonium production is buried in Hanford's 177 aging underground tanks. An estimated 67 of the tanks have leaked radioactive brew into the soil, contaminating the aquifer and threatening the Columbia River.

The Energy Department is required to remove at least 99 percent of the waste at Hanford.

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