FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Brionna Aho, Governor's Communications Director, Brionna.aho@gov.wa.gov, 360-628-3843; Ryan Miller, Ecology Communications Manager, Ryan.Miller@ecy.wa.gov, 509-537-2228

Oct. 15, 2025

Historic achievement: Governor Ferguson, Ecology celebrate nuclear waste officially being turned into glass at Hanford Site

Waste Treatment Plant is operational and treating radioactive and hazardous waste for safe, permanent disposal for the first time in history

HANFORD — After decades of work and billions invested at the nation's most complex cleanup site, Governor Bob Ferguson and the Washington State Department of Ecology announce nuclear waste is now being moved from deteriorating underground tanks and turned into glass for safe disposal at Hanford's Low-Activity Waste Facility.

This landmark moment comes ahead of an Oct. 15 legal deadline between Washington state and the U.S. Department of Energy to begin transforming radioactive and hazardous tank waste at the plant, a milestone known as "hot commissioning."

"It's difficult to overstate how important this milestone is in the Hanford cleanup effort," Governor Ferguson said. "Thousands of Washingtonians worked for decades to bring us to this moment. They deserve recognition for this achievement. A month ago, the U.S. Secretary of Energy said behind closed doors that the federal government would back away from its obligation to bring

this plant online. The united voices of workers, businesses and elected leaders made a difference. We made history today."

"It's pretty incredible to see this first-of-its-kind plant come online," said Casey Sixkiller, director of the Washington State Department of Ecology. "Transforming this waste into glass offers the best protection for the environment and communities across the Pacific Northwest. It was a herculean effort to make this a reality, and I'm so proud of my team for all their work."

The nuclear waste is being fed into a plant called the Low-Activity Waste Facility. It is one of the most unique and complex facilities in the world. Once inside, the waste goes through melters that turn it into glass – a highly stable material that can be safely stored for thousands of years.

For more than 25 years, Ecology has overseen the design, construction, environmental testing, and startup of the Low-Activity Waste Facility. Recently, Ecology issued a final operating permit and approval to Energy, authorizing waste treatment to begin after successful environmental testing. This permit ensures the plant's operations are protective of human health and the environment, outlining the parameters at which the facility can safely operate.

The Washington State Department of Health issued eight radioactive air emissions licenses to ensure operations at the Waste Treatment Plant met all health and safety standards to protect Washington residents.

"These licenses affirm our ongoing commitment to protecting the health and safety of Washington communities," Washington State Secretary of Health Dennis Worsham said. "As we move forward, we'll continue to hold this work to the highest standards and partner closely with agencies and local leaders to ensure the cleanup is completed safely and responsibly for future generations."

The Low-Activity Waste Facility is part of the larger Waste Treatment Plant at Hanford. Workers poured the first yard of concrete in June 2002, following more than a decade of planning by Ecology and Energy. The plant's commissioning process began in 2023, as the first "melter" unit began to heat up to prepare for its eventual role turning waste into glass.

Now that hot commissioning has begun, Energy and its contractors will continue work to reach full operations at the plant over the next few months. As this process unfolds, Ecology will continue its regulatory oversight and issue its final permit for full operations. Treating all of Hanford's tank waste will take decades and additional facilities and infrastructure.

Background

From World War II to the end of the Cold War, the Hanford Site produced more than 67 tons of plutonium for the nation's nuclear stockpile, leaving behind one of the most contaminated, complex environmental cleanup efforts in the world. Ecology and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency oversee Energy's cleanup of the Hanford Site, ensuring cleanup follows state and environmental laws, the Tri-Party Agreement that directs the cleanup work at the site, and a judicial consent decree, and various permits.

The site's 56 million gallons of highly radioactive and hazardous waste, stored in 177 aging underground tanks, are a byproduct of plutonium production, and represent one of Hanford's greatest threats to the environment, Columbia River, and nearby communities. Many of those tanks are assumed to have leaked, and three are actively leaking. More than 20 single-shell tanks had waste retrieved and moved to safer double-shell tanks for eventual treatment.

Low-activity waste vitrified at the Waste Treatment Plant will be permanently disposed of at the nearby Integrated Disposal Facility. Vitrification of high-level waste is expected to begin in 2033. That more dangerous, high-level waste will be disposed of at a licensed deep geologic repository that can safely store it for centuries.

Under an agreement finalized earlier this year, a portion of the site's low-activity waste will be encapsulated in a grout form for offsite disposal.

Learn more

- Ecology.wa.gov/Hanford
- Photos of the Low-Activity Waste Facility