Inez Austin: Reasons Why Austin Would Not Certify Pumping Procedures

Author(s)

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Description

Inez Austin and Westinghouse-Timeline.

Body

Inez Austin's refusal to certify pumping procedures stemmed from a chemical named ferrocyanide (FeCN). Ferrocyanide was used in the 1950s and 1960s as a flocculating agent, which means that it attracts certain chemicals and allows them to be selectively removed. The dangers of ferrocyanide were not known forty years ago, but it has since been found that it becomes unstable over time.

Inez feared there were risks in pumping two of the tanks which may have contained ferrocyanide. She is not a chemist -- "it's not my forte," she says -- but she did all the necessary research and concluded there was sufficient risk to withhold certification for the two tanks in question. In particular, there was a chance that the pipes could have gotten plugged and caused an explosion.

"I thought there was maybe a one in ten chance of an accident," said Austin. "Probably wouldn't have happened, but ten percent is an unacceptable risk. It could have been a major disaster and caused several million dollars in damage."

She wanted to postpone pumping long enough for certain research on the problem to be finished. That ultimately consumed about three more years, which would have been too late for the schedule Hanford was trying to keep.

Austin's warnings were cut out of her report, and when she was asked to sign the amended document she refused and resigned from the Readiness Review Board. The pumping was not completed on schedule, and as retaliation, Austin began to be harassed.

Rights

Use of Materials on the OEC

Resource Type

Case Study / Scenario

Topics

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Environmental Justice
Community Relations

Discipline(s)

Nuclear Engineering
Engineering