

Our View: No monster bugs at Hanford, but a monster of a problem

Last week part of a wood-and-dirt tunnel built to contain rail cars filled with radioactive waste collapsed at Hanford Nuclear Reservation.

Fortunately, according to the U.S. Department of Energy, no workers were reported injured, and it appears no radioactive material was released. So far, there are no reports of massive beetles and spiders roaming the surrounding desert, and that clearly is a positive, because who wants to be eaten by a gigantic arachnid or decapitated by an angry weevil?

Even in the absence of radioactive bugs, the government still has quite the predicament on its hands.

The facility near Richland, Wash., was critical to the nation's weapons-grade plutonium production during World War II and is home to the most nuclear waste of any facility in the country.

According to The Associated Press, the tunnel was constructed during the Cold War to hold rail cars loaded with equipment that had been contaminated in plutonium production. DOE officials said it had been sealed since the mid-1990s - that is until last week's mishap.

The cave-in, which may have gone undetected for as long as four days, resulted in a hole estimated to cover 400 square feet. It has been filled with more than 50 truckloads of clean soil. Crews will be working in the coming days to place a plastic cover over all of the nearly 360-foot tunnel.

We can't imagine that dumping dirt on toxic radioactive material and covering it with a tarp is a long-term fix. Nor do we understand why no sensors were placed on it to alert officials to the collapse.

For years the cleanup has been plagued with expensive delays. Most recently, Hanford officials discovered 67 of its 177 underground tanks have been leaking radioactive waste, and the fear is the waste could at some point seep into the Columbia River.

The cleanup of Hanford is still expected to take decades and come with a price tag well into the billions.

The federal government can keep punting on finding a permanent solution to the problem, but the issue is not going away. As the infrastructure continues to age, we can expect more incidents, perhaps much more serious next time, and the cost of dealing with the mess to continue to rise.