The Associated Press reports that six underground storage tanks at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Washington State are leaking a witches' brew of high-level nuclear wastes into the soil that threatens regional groundwater supplies. This news highlights a crisis of national proportions that has for too long gone unaddressed.

Hanford is the most contaminated nuclear site in the nation. Built during World War II, the federally owned and operated facility produced the plutonium for the atom bomb dropped on Nagasaki, Japan, in August 1945. After the war, Hanford remained in operation, and provided most of the plutonium used in the U.S. nuclear arsenal. In more recent years, Hanford has become the de facto storage area for two-thirds of the nation's high level nuclear wastes. The feds are spending $2 billion each year on Hanford cleanup efforts–fully one-third of the government's entire budget for nuclear waste management and remediation nationwide.

Yet there remain problems aplenty at the site. According to the Associated Press, the Hanford facility currently stores some 53 million gallons of high-level nuclear wastes in underground storage tanks that were installed decades ago and which have long exceeded their intended 20-year life span. And therein lies the crisis.

Over 1 million gallons of nuclear wastes have previously leaked from Hanford's storage tanks, and now AP reports that six of the underground tanks are leaking anew. Washington state officials led by Governor Jay Inslee are demanding answers–and solutions–from the federal government. Meanwhile, the U.S. Department of Energy claims the new leaks are causing no immediate health risk to the local area, and promises an eventual (if unspecified) long-term fix.

The latest nuclear waste fiasco at Hanford is but the most visible component of a nationwide problem. Nuclear fission reactors were for many years considered the "pollution free" answer to the country's energy demands. Remarkably, however, scores of nuclear power plants were built around the country in the second half of the 20th century despite the fact that no long-term solution was ever developed for the so-called "back-end" of the nuclear fuel cycle–i.e., safe and secure technology to permanently render inert and store plutonium and other high-level nuclear wastes. The result? Many "temporary" nuclear waste storage facilities scattered around the country, often located at the sites of now-shuttered nuclear electrical generating facilities. And a number of them, like Hanford, are leaking, using deteriorating storage facilities, and under-capitalized–all presenting a clear and present danger to public health and environmental safety.

And there's a second, even more alarming, crisis looming. Many of these crumbling interim

nuclear waste storage facilities are not secure from a military perspective. Despite the fact that they contain plutonium from which crude nuclear weapons could be fashioned, these facilities offer an attractive target for domestic or foreign terrorist attack and/or theft.

It is for both of these documented reasons that, unlike many of my environmental colleagues, I've long favored the idea of a centralized, federally operated and protected high-level nuclear waste storage facility. Congress and the President actually designated such a site in the 1980's: Yucca Mountain, in Nye County, Nevada. But despite the fact that the National Academy of Sciences has for over a century supported this type of geologic storage site as the best means of protecting the environment and public health and safety, rear guard opposition led by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada has blocked completion of the Yucca Mountain project. The Obama Administration has shown no interest in pursuing Yucca Mountain or any other long-term answer to the nation's chronic high-level nuclear waste crisis.

As the latest news from Hanford, Washington, demonstrates, continued inaction on this front has its own significant perils.