

The Wahluke (North) Slope of the Hanford Site: History and present challenges.

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AbstractAbstract

[en] The Hanford Site was founded in early 1943 for the top secret government mission of producing plutonium for the world's first atomic weapons. A great deal of land was needed, both to separate various Site facilities from each other, and to provide buffer zones for safety and security purposes. In total, 640 square miles were occupied by the original Hanford Site and its buffer zones. Much of this land had been earmarked for inclusion in the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project (CBP). After World War II ended, a series of national decisions led to a long-term mission for the Hanford Site, and area residents learned that the Site lands they had hoped to farm would be withheld from agricultural production for the foreseeable future. A long set of negotiations commenced between the federal management agency responsible for Hanford (the Atomic Energy Commission -- AEC), and the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR), Department of the Interior that managed the CBP. Some lands were turned back to agriculture, and other compromises made, in the Site's far northern buffer lands known as the Wahluke Slope, during the 1950s. In the mid-1960s, further negotiations were about to allow farming on lands just north of the Columbia

River, opposite Hanford's reactors, when studies conducted by the BOR found drainage barriers to irrigation. As a result of these findings, two wildlife refuges were created on that land in 1971. Today, after the Hanford Site plutonium production mission has ended and as Site cleanup goes forward, the possibility of total release of Wahuake Slope lands from the control of the Department of Energy (DOE -- a successor agency to the AEC) is under discussion. Such discussion encompasses not just objective and clearly visible criteria, but it resurrects historical debates about the roles of farming and government presence in the Columbia Basin

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