DOE "Accelerated Cleanup":
Doesn't Meet Legal Requirements, Fails to Save Time or Money

Production of the massive U.S. Cold War nuclear arsenal has left dozens of Department of Energy (DOE) sites across the country polluted with radioactive and hazardous wastes. Most DOE sites are now on the Superfund list, and the contamination threatens millions of people living nearby or along waste transportation routes. Some of the nation's most important water resources are also endangered.

During the past decade, DOE's Environmental Management (EM) program has spent about $70 billion and has "completed" cleanup activities at dozens of sites. At the "closed" nuclear weapons complex sites, however, monitoring and treatment work will continue for decades, and the land is still too contaminated for residential and many other uses.

With the most heavily contaminated sites remaining to be cleaned up, DOE estimates that more than $125 billion in additional funds are needed for environmental remediation over the next several decades.

In the 1980s, after neighbors of DOE sites became aware of extensive environmental degradation, DOE signed several cleanup agreements with states and the Environmental Protection Agency. In recent years, DOE has been "renegotiating" requirements in many of those agreements. DOE's Fiscal Year (FY) 2008 Budget Request does not provide enough funding to meet all of the agreements.

If DOE fails to meet its obligations under the agreements, additional expenses could result from fines and penalties and, more importantly, contamination could spread even farther.

Sites to be Cleaned Up Are Making New Waste

Numerous DOE sites – Lawrence Livermore, Los Alamos and Sandia national laboratories; the Nevada Test Site, Oak Ridge, Pantex, and Savannah River – where cleanup activities are in progress are also currently involved in design, testing, and production of nuclear weapons and materials. Now DOE is proposing new weapons facilities, as well as a complete overhaul of the entire nuclear weapons complex. "Complex 2030" would design and build a new generation of nuclear weapons and create additional waste at those DOE sites for decades to come – making cleanup an ever-more expensive, never-ending activity.

The most contaminated DOE sites – Hanford, WA; Savannah River, SC; and the Idaho National Laboratory – reprocessed "spent" reactor fuel to extract plutonium and uranium for nuclear weapons. The Bush Administration's Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (GNEP) plan would break the 30-plus year suspension of reprocessing, and create new spent fuel storage and reprocessing facilities. The large quantities of additional reprocessing waste could lead to further contamination.

Recommendations

- Restore funding for environmental cleanup in the 2008 budget to levels required to comply with all laws and cleanup agreements.
- Require that future budget requests include the funding levels necessary at each site to meet cleanup agreements and to fulfill Legacy Management requirements.
- Prohibit new nuclear weapons development and reprocessing that will generate waste and require more cleanup.

Lack of funding and poor project management slow important cleanup work, threatening crucial water resources like the Columbia River which flows through the heavily contaminated Hanford site.

The three old reprocessing sites are all under consideration for GNEP facilities, along with three other DOE sites undergoing cleanup – Oak Ridge, TN; Paducah, KY; and Portsmouth, OH.

New nuclear weapons and power development divert funding necessary to address the radioactive contamination at these decades-old sites. Instead, DOE should comply with its legal agreements to actually clean up sites and not waste taxpayer money on programs that create additional waste and cause further contamination.

"Accelerated Cleanup" Fails to Save Money

DOE proclaimed that its 2002 "Top-to-Bottom Review" and resulting "accelerated cleanup" program would streamline its efforts and make them more cost-effective. Further, in its FY 2004 Environmental Management Budget Request, DOE told Congress: "EM believes it can achieve greater than $50 billion in life-cycle savings, and is committed to a stretch goal of $100 billion." However, DOE has now reversed that position and is now predicting life-cycle cost *increases* of $40 billion in its cleanup programs. In addition, remediation of the extensive groundwater pollution at many DOE sites has never been included in the cost estimates because there is no technology currently available to remove the contamination. Considering DOE's record, it is likely that actual spending will be even higher than current estimates.

Moreover, the Performance Management Plans (PMP), guidelines for "accelerated cleanup" at each site, are not being updated or used to hold EM accountable to Congress or the public, as they were intended. Not only are PMP milestones not being met, "risk reduction" is not occurring at some sites, and real contamination problems are not being adequately addressed. For example, construction of groundwater monitoring wells at Los Alamo National Laboratory in New Mexico is years behind schedule, and many of the wells do not work.

Rather than cleaning up the sites more quickly, the most contaminated sites face substantial delays. Completion of Hanford high-level waste cleanup will be delayed seven years. Completion of similar projects at the Savannah River Site will be delayed six years, despite Congress changing the definition of high-level waste there in response to DOE's promise that it would speed cleanup and save money.

Legacy Management Must Fulfill Its Commitments

DOE sites declared "closed" and administered by the Office of Legacy Management (OLM) still have continuing requirements for funding and public involvement. Adequate funding, on the order of hundreds of millions of dollars for years to come, is needed for worker pensions, continued monitoring, and public information and participation at each of those sites. Though a new agency, problems are already surfacing at OLM. Public inclusion via the Local Stakeholder Organizations created at Rocky Flats, in Colorado, is not broadly representative and thus does not conform with Federal Advisory Committee Act requirements. At Fernald, in Ohio, the local OLM office has not satisfactorily responded to citizens' concerns over the discovery of contaminated items on the site, which was declared "clean" in 2006.

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