

ECA Update: November 3, 2015



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GAO Report: NNSA Proliferation Threat Assessment Program 'Could be Improved'

ECA Staff

A recent [report](#) released by the Government Accountability Office revealed that the "Over the Horizon" program under the National Nuclear Security Administration, which identifies potential future nuclear proliferation threats, could improve by addressing multiple limitations undermining its current effectiveness.

The program under the NNDA Office of Defense Nuclear Nonproliferation, which began in 2010, determines nuclear and radiological dangers over a five- to 10-year period. The program's methods include interviews and trend workshops, analysis of the literature addressing proliferation threats, and peer review sessions. GAO expressed its concerns with some of the established methods employed by NNSA, including how peer interviews are conducted by officials. According to the GAO report, NNSA officials failed in documenting the rationale for selecting individuals who provided balanced views and knowledge in addressing proliferation threats.

GAO officials have expressed their concerns regarding the quality

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New Orleans, LA
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Calendar

[EMSSAB Oak Ridge](#)

of analysis and effectiveness of the OTH program. Congressional also expressed their concerns and have asked for improved implementation of literature reviews and other established methods of proliferation threat analysis.

Please find a copy of the full report [here](#).

Q&A: What's Next for America's Nuclear-Waste Clean-Up

Wall Street Journal

November 2, 2015

[LINK](#)

The Senate and House are expected as early as this week to take up the defense authorization bill President Barack Obama vetoed last month and try to push a version of it through again. Buried in the bill is a proposal that could dramatically re-order nuclear-weapons clean-up activities, a decades-long effort that is costing taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars.

The proposal is five paragraphs, barely noticeable in the 1,000-plus-page document. But, if implemented, its effects could be felt in communities around the country. Here's a Q&A:

What is the problem?

Creating America's nuclear arsenal left thousands of structures around the U.S. tainted with radioactive and chemical contamination. Over the past quarter century, the Energy Department clean-up office has disposed of about 2,800 of them with a like number still to do. However, for various reasons some of the dirtiest and most dangerous buildings aren't yet on that clean-up list and might not be added for decades.

How many structures are in this sort of limbo?

An Energy Department inspector general's report this year put the number at over 350. Among them is Alpha 5 in Tennessee. Larger than ten football fields, it produced uranium for the Hiroshima bomb but is now a decaying structure of radioactive and chemical contamination where "the speed of degradation is far outpacing" maintenance funding, said an Energy Department report.

Why aren't these places getting addressed?

The issue, as with many things, is money. The Energy Department's money for the weapons program and the clean-up

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November 19

effort come from the same the same kitty. A quarter century ago, with the end of the Cold War, more money for the first time started flowing into clean-up than weapons. In recent years that situation has reversed. Plus, much of the money available to the clean-up operation is committed at various sites and there isn't enough money to take to address some of these other buildings—even if they are more in need of attention than some of the structures being dealt with.

What are Congress and the administration doing?

The energy secretary has appointed a working group to review clean-up priorities. The provision in the vetoed defense bill would require buildings such as Alpha 5 to be added to the clean-up operation within three years—a timetable the Obama administration says isn't possible.

Delayed deadlines proposed for central Hanford work

Tri-City Herald

November 1, 2015

[LINK](#)

The Department of Energy and its Hanford regulators are proposing new legal deadlines for much of the environmental cleanup work in central Hanford after focusing spending on cleanup closer to the Columbia River in recent years.

“Now we are in a situation that we have milestones that can't be met,” said Emerald Lajja, an Environmental Protection Agency scientist.

Proposed new deadlines, some pushing out deadlines by almost a decade or delaying requirements to set deadlines until more information will be available, will be discussed at a public meeting Nov. 4 in the Tri-Cities and at meetings later this month in Seattle, Portland and Hood River.

During the past 26 years, the more than 450 changes have been made to the Tri-Party Agreement, which sets legal deadlines for Hanford cleanup. But the package of changes proposed now is among the 10 most significant packages of changes proposed in the document's history, said John Price, the Tri-Party Agreement section manager for the Department of Ecology.

The Washington State Department of Ecology has known for a

couple of years that central Hanford deadlines could not be met, Price said. The proposed changes cover 64 milestones and a broad scope of work.

The state and EPA have been working with DOE as it develops preliminary plans to do the work based on the study of contaminated areas so the agencies. That effort will be used to realistically determine how much additional time will be needed, including for more complete studies.

The agencies also have been discussing how much work could be completed under Hanford annual budgets that are not expected to increase significantly and how to keep work on a steady pace to prevent cycles of layoffs of experienced workers followed by retraining new workers.

“This is a realistic, achievable plan at a slightly higher budget level than they (DOE) are getting today,” Price said. Along with other work assigned to the DOE Richland Operations Office, it would require annual budgets of about \$1.2 billion rather than typical current budgets approaching \$1 billion.

The proposed new deadlines would cover much of the remaining cleanup work in central Hanford, other than work related to Hanford’s tanks holding 56 million gallons of radioactive waste. It also would cover some key work yet to be finished near the Columbia River — excavation of the high-hazard 618-11 Burial Ground and cleanup of the highly radioactive spill beneath the 324 Building just north of Richland.

They would mesh with other new deadlines for retrieving temporarily buried waste in central Hanford that may be sent to the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant, a national waste repository in New Mexico, and for removing radioactive sludge from the K West Basin and treating it for disposal.

As the DOE worked to get most of the Hanford cleanup along the Columbia River completed by this year, the approach included a bias for action, Price said. Contaminated soil and waste was dug up and then sampled because of the risk to the river.

But for central Hanford, a more deliberate approach is being proposed. More investigation of contamination is being done before cleanup, Price said.

The contamination could be much deeper underground. Near the Columbia River, some contaminated soil was excavated down to groundwater at 85 feet deep and then a little lower. But in central Hanford, contamination may stretch 300 feet down to groundwater.

The central Hanford waste and contamination would have come from chemical processing of radioactive material rather than largely from reactor operations along the Columbia River, and levels of contamination may be greater. In central Hanford, irradiated fuel and sometimes other material was processed to remove plutonium or other potentially useful material.

The first group of new deadlines is for completing the investigation of contamination and feasibility studies of methods for cleanup up of key central Hanford areas, with some exceptions that include cleanup related to the underground waste storage tanks and the five large processing facilities, called canyons.

The investigations would include all of the 200 East and West Areas, 43 miles of unlined trenches used to dispose of contaminated debris and soil contamination deep in the ground.

“The Central Plateau is very complicated, so an investigation can take several years,” Price said.

Multiple deadlines would be extended or added for the studies. But the final date for completion of the investigations and feasibility studies would be extended from the end of 2016 to June 2026.

A second set of deadlines would cover the actual cleanup work covered by the investigation and feasibility studies. Now the deadline is fall 2024. But the new deadlines would be set depending on what decisions were made by 2026, based on the feasibility studies.

A third set of deadlines would cover cleanup deadlines for three of five of Hanford’s processing canyons. Work plans for the PUREX, REDOX and B Plant canyon facilities and waste sites would be required to be submitted by June 2026, an extension from fall 2022.

Because the canyon facilities are comparatively stable, their cleanup is a lower priority than some other central Hanford cleanup, Price said.

The deadlines do not include the other two canyons because

decisions have been made and cleanup work has started on Hanford's U Plant and T Plant is being used for some work with radioactive materials.

Another set of deadlines would cover the 618-11 Burial Ground, which contains highly hazardous waste from defense production of plutonium but is by the Columbia Generating Station, a commercial nuclear power reactor on leased Hanford land. The set of deadlines also would cover a spill of cesium and strontium under the 324 Building and removal of the building when it is no longer needed to serve as a protective barrier over the spill.

Cleanup of those two sites would be required to be completed in fall 2021, an extension of three years.

"The Department of Ecology is very interested to hear what the public thinks and we encourage people to come out and talk to us" at hearings, Price said.

Journal Times editorial: Nuclear waste disposal needs a permanent solution

Journal Times

November 2, 2015

[LINK](#)

In an era that has been rife with raiding funds that are earmarked for future purposes, it probably shouldn't have come as a shock to see that it's going on in the forlorn nuclear power industry as well.

News reports last week said power companies — including one in Wisconsin and another just across the state line in Zion, Ill. — have been siphoning ratepayer dollars that were set aside for the dismantling of nuclear plants when they're taken out of service and instead using it to build concrete pads and steel casks to store spent nuclear waste on site.

That's against federal Nuclear Regulatory Commission rules, but the NRC has been complicit in this raid.

"All of the plants that have permanently shut down in recent years have sought and been approved for the use of decommissioning funds for spent fuel storage costs," an NRC spokesman told Associated Press.

Power companies don't deserve the blame on this. They were never expected to be the final stop for storage of spent fuel — that

was going to be the job of the U.S. Department of Energy.

They had a plan, and a site: Yucca Mountain in Nevada. But those plans went astray thanks to Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., who has blocked the federal government from developing the remote mountain site.

In the interim, utilities have had to deal with the storage of spent fuel on site for many more years than they anticipated. That costs money for both construction and security and it raises questions over whether the set aside funds will be sufficient.

It raises questions as well over just how secure these plant-based, on-site storage areas will be in the future since all of the country's nuclear plants are located near bodies of water because of their cooling needs.

Over time, bad things can and do happen. For evidence of that we have only to look to St. Louis, where a small community is on edge because a 5-year-old fire beneath a landfill is growing uncomfortably close to buried nuclear waste. County officials say there is a potential for radioactive fallout to be released if the fire reaches the waste.

This is not waste from power plants. It's almost 9,000 tons of buried barium sulfate that came from the federal government's Manhattan Project to develop nuclear weapons during World War II.

The raids on the decommissioning funds and the continued storage of nuclear waste at power plant sites across the country are bad public policy. With Reid set to leave office, Congress should revive the Yucca Mountain project, fund it and end the haphazard system that now exists.