

CLEANING UP DOE'S NUCLEAR WEAPONS COMPLEX

A half century ago, the United States initiated a massive effort to produce a nuclear weapon that would end World War II. The postwar period saw the production of the most powerful nuclear arsenal in the world. With the end of the Cold War, the need for production capacity has diminished, leaving behind the gargantuan task of safely storing and disposing of vast quantities of nuclear and other types of hazardous materials. In its study *Cleaning Up the Department of Energy's Nuclear Weapons Complex*, the Congressional Budget Office assesses the tasks, schedules, and budgetary requirements the Department of Energy (DOE) faces as it turns its attention from producing weapons to cleaning up its complex.

In 1989, DOE created the Office of Environmental Restoration and Waste Management, which has primary responsibility for cleanup activities. The budget has risen rapidly from \$1.6 billion in 1989 to more than \$6 billion in 1994; the Administration projects it to exceed \$7 billion by 2000.

How much the cleanup program will ultimately cost taxpayers is unknown. Recent estimates range from \$400 billion to \$1 trillion, but no estimate can be made with confidence until the Congress and regulators clarify the program's goals. These goals include reducing health and safety risks to humans, mitigating damage to the environment, and making sites available for industrial, commercial, residential, or recreational uses. Setting goals and priorities will help DOE to determine the steps required to achieve them, which in turn will permit more accurate cost estimates.

There is general agreement that DOE should promptly eliminate imminent hazards to the public, and the department is moving to do so. In dealing with the remainder of the program, however, the Congress and DOE must decide what to do and when to do it. Should DOE attempt to minimize all risks to human health and the environment, regardless of cost, or is some amount of risk acceptable? What should be the ultimate use of each site, and how quickly should it be restored to an alternative use?

While DOE gathers information and performs the analyses necessary to address these issues and set priorities, it must also continue to manage its ongoing cleanup efforts. Several policy changes might make those efforts more efficient. DOE could place greater emphasis on developing technologies to achieve faster, safer, cheaper, and more effective cleanup. Increasing the proportion of environmental management funds spent on promising new technologies could yield substantial savings in cleanup costs over the long run as well as provide greater protection for workers.

As it develops new technologies, DOE could delay projects that are costly and time consuming to carry out with current technology. DOE is proceeding with some of these difficult tasks, even in the absence of techniques to accomplish them efficiently, because it is bound by agreements with states and the Environmental Protection Agency that contain schedules and deadlines for cleaning up specific sites. Delaying projects would breach some of these agreements, but DOE may be able to renegotiate some of them to obtain more realistic conditions.

DOE has been criticized for inefficiency and inaction in its cleanup efforts. The department may be devoting too much of its budget to administration and support, thus limiting the funds available for actual cleanup work. At least 40 percent of the cleanup program's funds are devoted to administrative and support activities, a level that many reviewers have considered excessive. DOE could achieve savings by providing better oversight of its many contractors and reforming the contracting process.

Questions about the Congressional Budget Office study should be directed to Elizabeth Pinkston of CBO's Natural Resources and Commerce Division at (202) 226-2940 or Frances Lussier of CBO's National Security Division at 226-2908. The Office of Intergovernmental Relations is CBO's Congressional liaison office and can be reached at 226-2600. For additional copies of the study, please call the Publications Office at 226-2809.



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Second and D Streets, S.W.

Washington, D.C. 20515