



DOE Cleanup: Underfunded and Inadequate



The Department of Energy (DOE) has produced radioactive materials for nuclear bombs; designed, built, and tested nuclear weapons; and developed reactor and other technologies with little concern for the environmental harm those activities cause. The inevitable result is that all DOE sites are polluted. Nevertheless, DOE remains far more interested in protecting its pollution-causing activities than in correcting the harm they have already done.

DOE is not meeting its legal and ethical responsibility to clean up the legacy of more than 60 years of radioactive and toxic contamination. Instead, DOE is promoting nuclear activities that will create additional pollution and threaten the health of future generations. Currently, water near some DOE facilities, such as Paducah, KY, and Pantex, TX, remains unfit to drink. Some of the nation's major water sources, including the Columbia River and Snake River Aquifer, are threatened.

Sites Remain Severely Contaminated

After neighbors of several sites became aware of environmental degradation in the 1980s, most DOE sites were put on the Superfund list of the nation's most polluted sites. DOE signed a series of cleanup agreements with states and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). In recent years, however, DOE has tried to abandon its obligations under those agreements. The agency's usual strategy is to announce a questionable cleanup "reform," then force

states and the people most affected to accept the changes by threatening to cut cleanup funding if they refuse.

Unfortunately, accepting less cleanup has also meant more funding cuts. The clearest example is DOE's effort to rename high-level waste (HLW) and leave it in place, a core component of the "Accelerated Cleanup" program. The intense political pressure of funding-cut threats worked in South Carolina and Idaho, where high-level waste can now be left in place despite the danger posed to crucial water resources.

After South Carolina and Idaho agreed to changes in the HLW definition, funding for cleanup of the Savannah River Site (SRS) and the Idaho National Laboratory (INL), two of the largest and most polluted DOE facilities, dropped. Washington State did not accept the DOE proposal for the Hanford Reservation, but funding for that site continues to be inadequate to meet legally binding cleanup milestones.

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"Closure" Leaves Pollution Behind

DOE scheduled three major sites to be cleaned up and closed in 2006. The results have been decidedly mixed.

At Fernald, DOE worked closely with the State of Ohio and the residents who live near the site. Cleanup there is winding down to most parties' satisfaction. The Fiscal Year (FY) 2007 budget request

Recommendations

- Restore funding for environmental cleanup in the 2007 budget to levels required to comply with all environmental laws and cleanup agreements.
- Reject the transfer of environmental cleanup activities to NNSA.
- Changes to cleanup agreements should be negotiated by affected stakeholders, not imposed unilaterally by DOE or Congress.
- Congress should direct the EPA to strengthen federal safe drinking water regulations by tightening the drinking water limit for plutonium and similar radionuclides.
- Reject the environmentally and economically dangerous revival of spent fuel reprocessing.



The massive Onsite Disposal Facility at Fernald, in Ohio. Cleanup at Fernald featured local stakeholder involvement and is winding down to most parties' satisfaction.

includes more than \$260 million for Fernald, 80 percent of the FY 2006 funding level. At the Rocky Flats plant in Colorado, DOE declared victory in the face of failure. Substantial levels of radioactive and toxic contamination remain under the surface. Despite opposition by people in the surrounding communities, the government is trumpeting the conversion of the site into a wildlife refuge. Similarly, DOE asserts that Mound in Ohio will be "successfully closed" in 2006 although no one knows how, when, or at what cost a hazardous and radioactive landfill will be cleaned up. The FY 2007 budget request provides no additional funding for that effort.

More Polluting Weapons and Power Programs on the Horizon

Cleanup budgets are also declining at most of the sites that will play key roles in ongoing or new weapons and power initiatives. Los Alamos, for instance, is losing cleanup funding even as plans proceed to manufacture more plutonium bomb triggers there. DOE wants to build a new highly-enriched uranium processing plant at Y-12 in Oak Ridge, TN. Nonetheless, DOE's FY 2007 budget for Defense Environmental Cleanup at Oak Ridge proposes a \$78.55 million cut even as contaminant levels in a nearby stream continue to rise.

INL and the Savannah River Site are identified in the government-financed nuclear power push, yet proposed FY 2007 cleanup levels would decline – \$20 million at INL and \$94 million at SRS.

After a decades-long hiatus, DOE is spearheading efforts to revive reprocessing, the technology responsible for considerable contamination, as part of an effort to resuscitate the nuclear power industry.

Let the Weaponeers Handle Cleanup?

At some of the weapons sites, DOE is also trying to shift cleanup responsibility back to the programs that caused the environmental problems, an approach rejected by Congress in 2005. At the Kansas City plant, Lawrence Livermore (CA), and Sandia (NM) laboratories, DOE wants to give cleanup responsibility to the National Nuclear Security Administration, its quasi-independent weapons arm. The Environmental Management (EM) program was created in 1989 precisely because DOE weaponeers could not clean up their wastes and contamination. Cleanup programs should remain within the EM program and not be turned over to the agency responsible for ongoing weapons production.

Strengthen Drinking Water Standards

Federal cleanup regulations must protect the health of current and future generations. Drinking water standards for certain radioactive contaminants, including plutonium, are out of step with this goal.

A recent independent scientific analysis shows that the federal drinking water limit for gross alpha contamination – which includes deadly plutonium – no longer fulfills the intent of safe drinking water regulations. This is because scientific understanding of how these radionuclides behave in the body has changed substantially since the limit was set thirty years ago. As part of the Environmental Protection Agency's legally mandated review of federal Maximum Contamination Levels, the standard needs to be tightened one hundred times, from 15 picocuries/liter to 0.15 picocuries/liter, in order to maintain the regulations' public health protection goals.

DOE has promised long-term, stable funding and cleanup of the nuclear weapons legacy. This is possible if the nuclear weapons budget is cut and funds are restored to meet cleanup agreements. Reprocessing, which will result in new contamination and cost tens of billions of dollars, must not be resumed.

For further information:
Alliance for Nuclear Accountability
322 4th Street NE
Washington, DC 20002
phone: (202) 544-0217 fax: (202) 544-6143
www.ananuclear.org