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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-04-1097T](#), testimony before the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Low-level radioactive waste (LLRW) management concerns persist despite the LLRW Policy Act of 1980, as amended, which made states responsible for providing for disposal of class A, B, and C LLRW and made the Department of Energy (DOE) responsible for the disposal of greater-than-class C LLRW. This testimony is based on GAO's June 2004 report, which examined the adequacy of disposal availability for class A, B, and C wastes, and GAO's April 2003 report, which assessed recovery efforts involving greater-than-class-C waste. This testimony examines (1) changes in LLRW disposal availability since 1999, (2) recent LLRW disposal volumes and potential future volumes, (3) any current or anticipated shortfalls in disposal availability, (4) the potential effects of any such shortfalls, (5) the effectiveness of the Act in developing regional disposal options for class A, B, and C wastes, and (6) the status of DOE's effort to dispose of greater-than-class-C waste.

What We Recommend

The reports recommended that DOE improve its database and the management of greater-than-class C wastes. DOE is implementing most of these recommendations. In addition, GAO suggested that the Congress may wish to consider directing the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to report if LLRW conditions change enough to warrant legislative intervention.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-1097T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Robin M. Nazzaro at (202) 512-3841 or nazzaror@gao.gov.

LOW-LEVEL RADIOACTIVE WASTE

Future Waste Volumes and Disposal Options Are Uncertain

What GAO Found

GAO's June 2004 report identified several changes since 1999 that have affected, or might affect, LLRW disposal availability and federal oversight. Specifically, one disposal facility plans to close its doors to most states, but new options are evolving that might offset this shortfall.

According to data from the three commercial disposal facility operators, annual LLRW disposal volumes have increased in recent years. In conducting this assessment, GAO relied on data from the operators because DOE's national LLRW database was unreliable. The timing and volume of future waste needing disposal are uncertain because of the difficulty in forecasting disposal shipments from DOE and nuclear utilities.

At current LLRW disposal volumes, disposal availability for class A waste is not a problem in the short or longer term. Disposal availability appears adequate until mid-2008 for class B and C wastes when, if disposal conditions do not change, most states will not have a place to dispose of these wastes.

Nevertheless, users of radioactive materials can continue to minimize waste generation, process waste into safer forms, and store waste if there are no disposal options for class B and C wastes after 2008. While these approaches are costly, GAO did not identify other immediate widespread effects.

The Act has not resulted in the development of additional regional disposal capacity for class A, B, and C wastes. Factors limiting further development include less waste, adequate disposal capacity, rising development costs, and public and political resistance in states designated to host these facilities.

DOE has not yet provided a facility for the permanent disposal of greater-than-class-C waste, but it is collecting this material to address security concerns in the interim.

Lowering Radioactive Waste into a Concrete Barrier at a Commercial Disposal Facility



Source: US Ecology, Inc.