

Highlights of [GAO-06-352](#), a report to congressional requesters

## Why GAO Did This Study

In 2001, when GAO reported on the cleanup of the Department of Energy's (DOE) Rocky Flats site, a former nuclear weapons production facility, the cleanup was behind schedule and over cost. In October 2005, the contractor declared that it had completed the cleanup much earlier and at less cost than DOE and the contractor had anticipated 5 years earlier. GAO was asked to determine the (1) factors that contributed to the cleanup's early completion, (2) remaining work and total costs, (3) measures to assess whether the cleanup achieved a level of protection of public health and environment consistent with the cleanup agreement, and (4) lessons the Rocky Flats cleanup may offer for other DOE cleanup projects.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommendations include that the Secretary of Energy ensure appropriate oversight of contractors' controls over data quality and assess the costs and benefits of tracking lessons learned across the DOE complex. DOE, Interior, Colorado, and Kaiser-Hill provided written comments, and generally agreed with the contents of the report. EPA did not provide official written comments but did provide editorial and technical suggestions, as did the other agencies, that we incorporated, as appropriate. DOE concurred with our recommendation about tracking lessons learned but did not state whether it concurred with the other two.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-352](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-352).

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Gene Aloise at (202) 512-3841 or [aloisee@gao.gov](mailto:aloisee@gao.gov).

# NUCLEAR CLEANUP OF ROCKY FLATS

## DOE Can Use Lessons Learned to Improve Oversight of Other Sites' Cleanup Activities

### What GAO Found

Four factors contributed to the early completion of Rocky Flats' cleanup: (1) DOE's and the contractor's ability to overcome numerous challenges, (2) the use of an accelerated cleanup process, (3) site-specific characteristics that limited the scope of the contamination, and (4) the contractor's financial incentive to finish the work quickly and safely.

Although the cleanup is complete, its sufficiency has not yet been ascertained; key steps remain before the planned Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge that will occupy the site can open to the public. For example, in about November 2006, the regulatory agencies—the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment—plan to issue their joint final decision on the sufficiency of the cleanup and any risk posed by residual contaminants.

The total cost of the cleanup, since 1995, is about \$10 billion in constant 2005 dollars. This cost includes contract costs of about \$7.7 billion (including contractor fees of about \$630 million), long-term stewardship and pension liabilities estimated at about \$1.3 billion, and other costs of nearly \$1 billion.

Although numerous measures in place to assess the cleanup appear adequate to judge the sufficiency of the cleanup, DOE did not effectively carry out some aspects of its oversight responsibilities. Among the assessment measures are completion of the regulatory process, activities undertaken to verify remedial actions, and reviews by independent and federal entities. The regulatory agencies have approved the cleanup of 360 areas of known or suspected contamination at the site. Data supporting the cleanup of these areas form the basis of regulatory decisions regarding the cleanup's sufficiency. Accordingly, we reviewed the contractor's controls intended to ensure the quality of these data and found them to be robust. However, DOE lacked assurance that the controls were working as intended because it did not independently assess the quality of these key data. One official told us that DOE was involved daily in reviewing documents and discussed with the contractor any data quality issues that arose.

DOE has identified and implemented at other sites some lessons from Rocky Flats, but DOE has not systematically tracked lessons learned at all of its cleanup sites, thus potentially losing the benefits of such lessons.

Rocky Flats in 1995



Rocky Flats in 2005



Source: DOE.