HAZARDOUS WASTE

Agencies Should Take Steps to Improve Information on USDA’s and Interior’s Potentially Contaminated Sites

What GAO Found

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of the Interior (Interior) have identified many contaminated and potentially contaminated sites, but neither agency has a complete inventory. As of April 2014, USDA had identified 1,491 contaminated sites and many potentially contaminated sites, including landfills and shooting ranges. However, USDA does not have a reliable, centralized site inventory or plans and procedures for completing one, in particular, for abandoned mines. Without a reliable inventory or plans and procedures for developing one, USDA cannot effectively manage its cleanup programs. As of April 2014, Interior had an inventory of 4,722 sites with confirmed or likely contamination. In addition, Interior’s Bureau of Land Management (BLM) had identified over 30,000 abandoned mines that were not yet assessed for contamination, and this inventory is not complete. BLM is working to improve the completeness and accuracy of its inventory.

In fiscal year 2013, USDA allocated over $22 million for environmental cleanup efforts, and Interior allocated over $13 million. Specifically, in fiscal year 2013, USDA allocated about (1) $3.7 million for cleanup projects department-wide, primarily for one large site; (2) $4.3 million to mitigate contamination at grain silos and foreclosure properties; and (3) approximately $14 million for the U.S. Forest Service to assess and clean up sites. In fiscal year 2013, Interior allocated almost $10 million for cleanup projects department-wide, the National Park Service allocated an additional $2.7 million and the Fish and Wildlife Service allocated over $800,000 for environmental assessment and cleanup projects. In addition, BLM allocated more than $34 million to its hazardous waste management and abandoned mine programs.

Both USDA and Interior report probable and reasonably estimable environmental liabilities on their financial statements. In fiscal year 2013, USDA reported environmental liabilities of $176 million, most of which was for asbestos cleanup. Interior reported environmental liabilities of $192 million to address 434 sites. Interior also disclosed that it will incur $62 million to $139 million in cleanup costs at government-acknowledged sites—sites with damage caused by nonfederal entities. The majority of the costs Interior disclosed were for cleanup activities at 85 abandoned mines. As USDA and Interior complete their inventories and assess them for contamination, it might be expected that related environmental costs for both agencies will increase as additional sites are considered.

The Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) role with regard to USDA and Interior sites is to maintain a list of potentially contaminated sites based on data from these agencies, take steps to assure that the agencies assess these sites for contamination, determine whether the sites should be proposed for the National Priorities List, and oversee certain cleanup activities. EPA has compiled a docket list of 260 USDA sites and 528 Interior sites that may pose health or environmental risks, most of which have been assessed. Disagreement with USDA and Interior over their need to assess the remaining sites and differing information on whether this requirement has been met at some sites means EPA cannot assure that the assessments are conducted in a timely manner and, ultimately, that sites most in need of remediation are addressed.