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**Highlights**

Highlights of [GAO-03-483](#), a report to the Ranking Minority Member, Subcommittee on Financial Management, the Budget, and International Security, Committee on Governmental Affairs, United States Senate

## Why GAO Did This Study

Potentially dangerous sealed sources containing greater-than-Class-C radioactive material pose a threat to national security because terrorists could use them to make “dirty bombs.” Public Law 99-240 requires the Department of Energy (DOE) provide a facility for disposing of unwanted sources. Because DOE has no disposal facility for these sources, its Off-Site Source Recovery Project is recovering and temporarily storing them at Los Alamos, New Mexico. GAO was asked to determine (1) the number of unwanted sealed sources that DOE plans to recover through 2010 and the estimated cost, (2) the status of recovery efforts and any problems that DOE may face, and (3) the status of DOE’s efforts to provide a disposal facility for these sealed sources.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of Energy (1) determine whether the priority given to the project is commensurate with the threat these sources pose; (2) ensure adequate resources are devoted to the project; (3) take immediate action to provide space to store sealed sources containing plutonium-239, strontium-90, and cesium-137; (4) initiate the process to develop a permanent disposal facility for greater-than-Class-C radioactive waste; and (5) develop a plan to ensure the continued recovery of greater-than-Class-C waste until a disposal facility is available. DOE did not comment on our recommendations.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-483](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-483).

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

# NUCLEAR NONPROLIFERATION

## DOE Action Needed to Ensure Continued Recovery of Unwanted Sealed Radioactive Sources

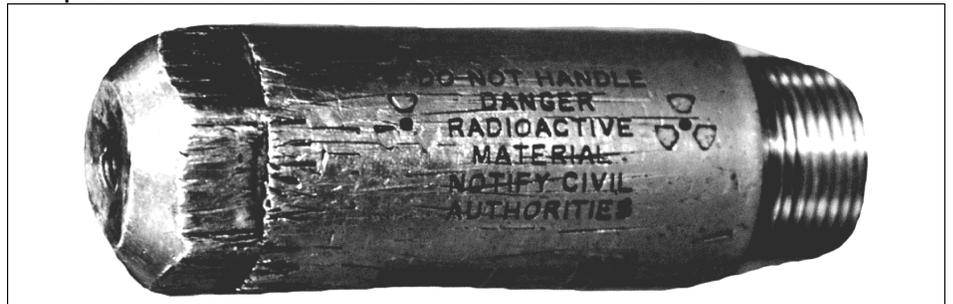
### What GAO Found

The exact number of unwanted greater-than-Class-C sealed sources in the United States is unknown, but DOE estimates it will recover about 14,300 such sources by the end of fiscal year 2010, at a total cost of about \$69 million. DOE’s estimate of the number of sealed sources it will recover was based on three assumptions—that a permanent disposal facility would be available by fiscal year 2007; that the Off-Site Source Recovery Project’s recovery operations would be phased out from fiscal years 2007 through 2010; and that, after fiscal year 2010, all sealed sources would be sent directly to a disposal facility and the project would cease operations.

Through February 2003, DOE’s Off-Site Source Recovery Project had recovered more than 5,000 greater-than-Class-C sealed sources from about 160 sites across the United States; however, the project faces three problems that could hinder future recovery efforts. First, the project is not a priority with DOE’s Office of Environmental Management, because, according to office officials, the project does not conform with the mission of the office. The project did not receive full funding, even after September 11, 2001, because of the Office of Environmental Management’s other higher priority projects, and the office’s current budget specifies future annual funding levels that, according to project officials, would be insufficient to enable the project to recover additional sealed sources. Second, DOE cannot recover any additional sealed sources containing plutonium-239 because the project has already run out of space at the Los Alamos National Laboratory that meets DOE’s higher security standards for storing these sources. Third, DOE has not approved a means for storing sealed sources containing strontium-90 and cesium-137 until a permanent disposal facility is available.

As of February 2003, more than 17 years after the enactment of Public Law 99-240, DOE had not made progress toward providing for the permanent disposal of greater-than-Class-C radioactive sealed sources, as required by the act. Specifically, DOE had not assigned responsibility to an office within DOE to begin developing such a facility. Also, according to DOE officials, DOE lacks a plan for ensuring the continued recovery of sealed sources in the likely event that the disposal facility is delayed beyond fiscal year 2007.

Example of a Radioactive Sealed Source That Contains Americium-241



Source: DOE.