

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-19-207](#), a report to the Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

EM manages DOE's radioactive and hazardous waste cleanup program using compliance agreements negotiated between DOE and other federal and state agencies. Within the agreements, milestones outline cleanup work to be accomplished by specific deadlines. EM's cleanup program faces nearly \$500 billion in future environmental liability, which has grown substantially.

GAO was asked to review DOE's cleanup agreements. This report examines the extent to which EM (1) tracks the milestones in cleanup agreements for EM's cleanup sites; (2) has met, missed, or postponed cleanup-related milestones at selected sites and how EM reports information; and (3) has analyzed why milestones are missed or postponed and how EM considers those reasons when renegotiating milestones.

GAO reviewed agreements and milestones at EM's 16 cleanup sites and compared information tracked by EM headquarters and these sites; interviewed officials from four selected sites (chosen for variation in location and scope of cleanup, among other factors); and reviewed EM guidance related to milestone negotiations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making four recommendations, including that EM establish a standard definition of milestones across the cleanup sites, track and report original and renegotiated milestone dates, and identify the root causes of why milestones are missed or postponed. In commenting on a draft of this report, DOE agreed with three of the recommendations and partially agreed with a fourth.

View [GAO-19-207](#). For more information, contact David C. Trimble at (202) 512-3841 or TrimbleD@gao.gov.

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NUCLEAR WASTE

DOE Should Take Actions to Improve Oversight of Cleanup Milestones

What GAO Found

The cleanup process at the 16 sites overseen by the Department of Energy's (DOE) Office of Environmental Management (EM) is governed by 72 agreements and hundreds of milestones specifying actions EM is to take as it carries out its cleanup work. However, EM headquarters and site officials do not consistently track data on the milestones. EM headquarters and site officials provided GAO with different totals on the number of milestones in place at the four sites GAO selected for review. These discrepancies result from how headquarters and selected sites define and track milestones. First, not all sites make the same distinction between major (i.e., related to on-the-ground cleanup) and non-major milestones and, as a result, are not consistently reporting the same milestones to EM headquarters. Second, sites do not consistently provide EM headquarters with the most up-to-date information on the status of milestones at each site. These inconsistencies limit EM's ability to use milestones to manage the cleanup mission and monitor its progress.

EM does not accurately track met, missed, or postponed cleanup-related milestones at the four selected sites, and EM's milestone reporting to Congress is incomplete. EM sites renegotiate milestone dates before they are missed, and EM does not track the history of these changes. This is because once milestones change, sites are not required to maintain or track the original milestone dates. GAO has previously found that without a documented and consistently-applied schedule change control process, program staff may continually revise the schedule to match performance, hindering management's insight into the true performance of the project. Further, since 2011, EM has not consistently reported to Congress on the status of the milestones each year, as required, and the information it has reported is incomplete. EM reports the most recently renegotiated milestone dates with no indication of whether or how often those milestones have been missed or postponed. Since neither EM headquarters nor the sites track renegotiated milestones and their baseline dates at the sites, milestones do not provide a reliable measure of program performance.

EM officials at headquarters and selected sites have not conducted root cause analyses on missed or postponed milestones; thus, such analyses are not part of milestone negotiations. Specifically, EM has not done a complex-wide analysis of the reasons for missed or postponed milestones. Similarly, officials GAO interviewed at the four selected sites said that they were not aware of any site-wide review of why milestones were missed or postponed. Best practices for project and program management outlined in GAO's Cost Estimating and Assessment Guide note the importance of identifying root causes of problems that lead to schedule delays. Additionally, in a 2015 directive, DOE emphasized the importance of conducting such analysis. Analyzing the root causes of missed or postponed milestones would better position EM to address systemic problems and consider those problems when renegotiating milestones with regulators. Without such analysis, EM and its cleanup regulators lack information to set more realistic and achievable milestones and, as a result, future milestones are likely to continue to be pushed back, further delaying the cleanup work. As GAO has reported previously, these delays lead to increases in the overall cost of the cleanup.