LOS ALAMOS NATIONAL LABORATORY

Contractor Improving in Safety and Other Areas but Still Faces Challenges

What GAO Found

Triad National Security, LLC—the management and operating (M&O) contractor for Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) since 2018—has taken steps to improve safety performance and culture at the laboratory. The National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) and other federal organizations have assessed these steps positively while acknowledging continued challenges. For example, NNSA found that Triad has made improvements to the documentation and analysis of hazards as well as to policies and practices for reporting safety issues. It has also developed corrective actions to resolve these issues. However, NNSA cited numerous operational incidents, such as injuries and a flood in a nuclear facility, which indicate that lessons learned from errors under the prior contractor have not been fully integrated into laboratory operations. NNSA officials stated they want to see Triad’s efforts result in an improved safety culture overall.

NNSA has realized approximately $35.1 million in anticipated cost savings during the first 3 years of the contract—specifically, lower overall contractor fees paid to Triad versus fees it would have paid the previous LANL contractor. However, in January 2020, GAO found that NNSA did not provide details on the limitations and uncertainties that could affect its cost savings estimate. Such limitations make it difficult to assess how much NNSA can expect to save going forward. For example, NNSA would not realize the total $76.1 million it anticipated saving if it does not award Triad option years—the last 5 years of the 10 possible years of the contract—which NNSA may award based on contractor performance. NNSA officials stated that Triad has made progress in stabilizing LANL’s workforce and has consistently met its annual goal for small business participation. However, Triad is facing challenges attracting new staff and small businesses due to LANL’s remote location and the unique nature of LANL’s work. NNSA officials said it is too early in the contract’s period of performance to determine Triad’s overall success in these areas.

Forging of Molten Plutonium at Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL)