

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-105665](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The federal government established the Los Alamos National Laboratory in 1943 to conduct nuclear weapons research and development activities to support our nation's defense. Over the years, these activities have necessitated cleanup in three areas: (1) soil and groundwater remediation, (2) legacy waste removal, and (3) deactivation and decommissioning of contaminated facilities.

In 2014, DOE established EM-LA to clean up waste at Los Alamos. To help address cleanup challenges at Los Alamos and other sites, EM issued a Program Management Protocol in 2020.

The Senate committee report that accompanied a bill for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2022 includes a provision for GAO to, among other things, assess the status of cleanup at Los Alamos. This report examines issues including (1) the steps EM-LA has taken to implement EM's Program Management Protocol and (2) EM-LA's oversight of contractor performance. GAO reviewed EM-LA documents related to the Program Management Protocol and contractor oversight and interviewed EM and EM-LA officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making six recommendations, including that EM-LA adopt a comprehensive approach to prioritizing cleanup and ensure that contractors have an approved performance baseline. DOE generally concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-23-105665](#). For more information, contact Nathan Anderson at (202) 512-3841 or andersonn@gao.gov.

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NUCLEAR WASTE CLEANUP

DOE Needs to Address Weaknesses in Program and Contractor Management at Los Alamos

What GAO Found

The Department of Energy's (DOE) Office of Environmental Management (EM) site office at Los Alamos (EM-LA) has taken steps to establish elements of EM's Program Management Protocol, which contains requirements and expectations for planning, budgeting, executing, and evaluating all work within EM's program. As of March 2023, EM-LA officials said they had submitted program management documents for approval, including a life cycle cost estimate and risk management plan. However, EM-LA has not taken a comprehensive approach to prioritizing cleanup activities in a risk-informed manner. For example, EM-LA has not analyzed different options for achieving site cleanup objectives, as called for in GAO's risk-informed decision-making framework, including optimization analyses that could identify how to most efficiently meet cleanup milestones. Without a comprehensive framework for prioritizing cleanup activities, EM-LA cannot be assured that it is making optimal cleanup decisions.

Weaknesses in EM-LA's oversight of the Los Alamos contractor, which is responsible for the execution of cleanup activities at the site, have limited EM-LA's understanding of cleanup progress and costs. Specifically, the contractor did not meet deadlines to develop a final performance baseline and EM-LA did not use available mechanisms to compel compliance with this requirement. A performance baseline is a measure against which EM-LA can track ongoing cost, scope, and schedule progress. EM-LA officials said that part of the difficulty in developing a baseline was due to the many modifications needed after the contract was awarded. Nonetheless, the delay in finalizing a baseline had consequences, including preventing EM-LA from understanding how much of the work it contracted for in 2018 is complete and at what cost. Without an approved baseline going forward, EM-LA will not have the data it needs to track cleanup progress, which is crucial for effective contract management.

Example of Legacy Waste Cleanup at Los Alamos National Laboratory



Source: Department of Energy's Office of Environmental Management Los Alamos Field Office. | [GAO-23-105665](#)